王国軍の最精鋭

『竜弓騎兵団』

の面々である。

目の前に整列する百を超える騎兵達に目線を向けた。
アウラは、傍らにプジョル・ギジェン将軍を従え、
走竜と呼ばれる大型爬虫類に騎乗した

「あ、あの、俺も抱いてみたいんだけど……いいかな？」

不器用な手つきで我が子を抱く夫に、女王アウラは笑みをなげかける。

待望の王子誕生である。

「ヒャッホー！

「ごちそうになります」
フェー、ドロレス、
レテの問題児三人組は、
喜び勇んでテーブルに付く。
「フェーちゃん、お砂糖取って」
「ちょっと、レテ……」

和気藹々（あいあい）とした雰囲気でお茶会は進む――。

理想の王宮生活 2

「妹のファティマにございます」

プジョル将軍は美しい少女を善治郎に紹介した。

「側室」として売り込むために――。

illustration 文倉 十

Tsunehiko Watanabe

渡辺恒彦

Prologue: Their respective opinions

A few days after Zenjirou's debut into high society was decided. Octavia returned to the Márguez Residence in the capital quite near the palace after a long time.

The building was built abundantly with white marble and a lot of arches, where even an amateur could tell on a glance that it was built in the same age as the palace.

The main residence was located extremely close to the palace and existed just as long as the palace. Of course it didn't belong to any average noble.

It could be said that this very residence directly represented the standing of the Márguez Family within the kingdom.

"Please halt the carriage here. I wish to walk for a bit."

Octavia had passed through the residence's gate in a two-horse carriage and called out to the attendants on the driver seats from within.

"Very well."

The middle-aged driver, also her guard, replied curt with that, then quietly stopped the carriage in an accustomed manner.

"Please watch your steps, Octavia-sama."

"Thank you. You be careful as well."

Octavia got off the carriage by taking the hand of a young waiting maid.

Currently it was the hottest season of the year. Octavia unconsciously squinnied from the assaulting sunlight, but the temperature inside the gate was five degree lower than outside.

Artificial ponds were situated all over the garden and the trees were planted so that a breeze would blow over the water surface towards the residence.

A resident of modern Japan aside, the heat wasn't unbearable for Octavia, who had been born and raised in the Carpa Kingdom.

She took it for granted that she was surrounded on all sides by guards with short spears and accompanied by a waiting maid while she quietly walked the short path from the gate to the main entrance of the residence.

The path was made out of red-brownish paving stone as to reflect the light, flanked on both sides by trees from the southern countries with brightly coloured blossoms. The big blossoms were yellow and red, giving the impressions of a hibiscus.

The Carpa Kingdom had a manifold of brilliant colours, not just limited to the nature.

The clothes Octavia was wearing right now, were of a brilliant and bright blue, too. This traditional wardrobe of the Carpa Kingdom had a quiet design, barely revealing any bodylines, but in modern Japan this colour hue would surely be considered as "magnificent". At least no married Japanese woman in her twenties like Octavia would wear these on a daily basis.

Before long, Octavia reached the front entrance of the residence and the large double door swung open inwards.

An elegant man in his forties stood beyond the door, which was pushed open by two muscular men.

"Welcome home, Octavia-sama."

The aged butler greeted her with a calm voice as always, whereat the young wife of the Count replied with a smile.

"Good to be home, Serlio. My usual room?"

"Yes, and the master is awaiting you on the second floor."

The faithful butler respectfully nodded to the mistress' words.

"I see. Then please tell him that I will come as soon as I have changed."

"Yes, very well."

"Thanks."

Octavia smiled softly as to thank him for his respectful bow, then disappeared into the residence with light steps and her waiting maid in tow.

Approximately half an hour later. Octavia met face-to-face with her husband, Count Manuel Márguez, in a room of the residence for the first time in half a month.

"Welcome back, Octavia."

Count Márguez stood up from the couch, which showed traces of aging, spread his arms and greeted his second wife that was more than thirty years younger than him.

He was a middle-aged noble with a stout physique.

Probably in his fifties?

As he wasn't one of the tallest, there would barely be any difference between him and Zenjirou, who was 1,72m tall, if they were to standd next to each other. His stomach had plumped out appropriate for his age, but since his short-cropped head hair and well-kept beard sustained a glossy black colour, he looked a few years younger than his actual age.

"It has been a while, Dear."

Octavia showed her husband an austere smile and then accepted his embrace.

"….."

"….."

After the corpulent husband and the slender wife embraced each other for a while, they sat down opposite of each other on the seats in the corner of the room.

The sun coming in from the windows was as hot as ever, but water ditches were built under the windows, so the breeze coming into the room was surprisingly refreshing.

Count Márguez flushed the cold tea served by a waiting maid down his throat, then began to talk with a slightly serious face.

"You've done well, Octavia. Sorry to have pushed that sudden request onto you."

"No, it is quite the honour for me to serve such a respectable person as a teacher."

"Right. You've always been like that."

Count Márguez couldn't keep himself from making a wry smile to his wife's response, which had not a single shred of ill intent as always.

Generally, women in higher society were quite proficient at obscuring their expressions and words, even in this world, but his young second wife was one of the few exceptions.

The Count would surely get a serious distrust of women if the entire conduct she was showing were to be an act.

"So, what's Zenjirou-sama like? Let me hear your honest opinion."

Lady Octavia frankly replied to the question of her husband with an eloquent tone.

"Yes, he seems to be a very likeable person with a strong desire to learn. I believe that he can be trusted."

"Mhm, I see."

Count Márguez kept nodding while listening to his wife speaking about the Prince Consort for a while.

Apart from evaluating them “too kindly“, her judgement of people could be trusted most of the time. When he exaggerated the bad points tenfold and deducted the good points to a tenth based on what she told him, then he could imagine the person’s character more or less.

So Count Márguez made his own interpretation of Octavia’s words, which portrayed the man called Zenjirou as “naively lenient to those under him” and “wise enough to understand his own position” with “no manly virtues such as ambition or aspiration”.

To be honest, not really the kind of convenient person for gaining a foothold into the royal family.

It was difficult to involve a conservative and rational person with no ambition, in a conspiracy.

That said, Zenjirou was actually the only male in the royal family. An existence far too precious to ignore just because it was difficult to meddle with him.

After musing for some time, Count Márguez frankly asked for the opinion of his wife.

“Octavia, what kind of woman would you choose if you had to assign a concubine to Zenjirou-sama?”

Octavia, too, was a born high-class noble. However, the young Lady widened her eyes once in surprised as she wasn’t used to this kind of topic, then showed a bit of a wry smile and shook her head.

“I… would not assign anyone for a little while longer. While I only saw Her Highness and Zenjirou-sama together a handful of times, it does seem that the two of them are rather intimate from what I have heard from the waiting maids working in the inner palace or from Zenjirou-sama’s daily conduct itself.

Even if a concubine were to come up to the inner palace now, she most likely would feel out of place.”

Needless to say, an ordinary concubine had an overwhelming lower standing than the legal wife. And even much less in the current pairing of “Queen”, “Prince Consort” and “Concubine” instead of “King”, “Queen Consort” and “Concubine”.

The difference in social standings between the legal wife and a concubine was already large to begin with, but a “Concubine” would never be a match for a “Queen”.

Normally, a concubine was often of poorer birth and lower standing than the legal wife, so the affection of the King was the only point in which she could win against the legal wife.

And in regards to that affection, an assigned concubine would only suffer a cruel fate if the relationship between Zenjirou and Queen Aura was really that insurmountable.

“Hmm, is that so…”

“Yes.”

Count Márguez tilted his head in contemplation as he still couldn’t assent with the frank words of his wife.

He was by no means stupid or obstinate, but as a man from the Carpa Kingdom, he only had a very stereotypical view on things.

In compliance with his values, he found it somewhat hard to imagine that there was a man, who could love that “Queen Aura” to such an extent.

The ideal woman for a man of the Carpa Kingdom was more or less a woman like his second wife sitting in front of him.

Namely a woman, who silently followed her man respectfully without speaking out of line. That was the criterion for a “good woman”.

“Wisdom” was desired, but not “intelligence”. “Hardworking” was considered as a virtue, but “assertiveness” as an immorality.

In Count Márguez’s eyes, the human called Aura Carpa was a “virago too good to be a woman” as a Ruler, but not very attractive as a single woman. Of course that impression acknowledged that Aura was a beauty with a glamorous body.

Count Márguez asked again as if to make sure.

“Are you saying that Zenjirou-sama loves Her Highness Aura with all of his heart?”

Lady Octavia’s opinion didn’t waver on her husband’s reconfirmation and she replied distinctly.

“Yes, without a doubt.

Seeing as he lacks ambition and the desire for power, I would go as far as to say that the only reason that he abandoned his own world to come here, was his love for Her Highness.”

To be precise, Zenjirou had two reasons to accept the marriage with Aura. One was his love for her, the other was his urge to quit the company that kind of exploited him. But only Zenjirou himself knew this.

Anyway, Count Márguez could only accept that he miscalculated a bit when Queen Aura’s type was to Zenjirou’s liking.

The Carpa Kingdom was a large country that ruled over the western part of the southern continent, but Aura was the only one of her kind. Or at least, the Count didn’t know of anyone else. Thus it was impossible for him to curry favour with Zenjirou through the most typical approach of sending a woman of his liking to the inner palace.

He became absorbed in thought with a serious face for a while.

“Hmm… In that case, it would be better to take the approach of supporting their relationship for now.”

The conclusion he finally reached was a rather defensive one.

The Márguez Family was already a distinguished family with plenty of influence in the current politics. It was a kind of instinct for high class nobles to make intrigues as to enlarge their sphere of influence or family prosperity, but his position wasn’t one, where he needed to make any risky bets.

If the relationship between the Queen and her husband was that good, it might be better for him to constantly gain the Queen’s favour by supporting their intimate relationship for the time being.

As a matter of fact, the birth of a child between the Queen and her husband took priority over spreading the royal blood by the means of concubines for the husband, from the viewpoint of an important figure supporting the kingdom.

“Yes, I believe that to be the best choice as well.”

Octavia smiled happily from the bottom of her heart and nodded to the deduction of her husband.

She knew, too, that marriages of nobles/royalty prioritized the preservation of the bloodline or bonds between the families over the love of the involved parties.

But on an emotional level, she wanted a loving couple to build a happy family without any obstacles, even in light of such a reality.

Count Márguez could perfectly read his beloved wife’s thought from her bright smile, showed a bit of a wry smile and muttered.

“Still, I just don’t get Zenjirou-sama’s taste in women…”

That utterance could have been lese majesty if Aura had heard it, but that statement came from the bottom of his heart.

* * *

Around the same time, Queen Aura visited the training ground of the royal army outside the capital in a long time.

The vegetation in the western part of the southern continent was famous for their abnormal fast growth and weeds overran the fields right after they had been tended to, but thousands of armed people and hundreds of raptorial dragons were running around on this training ground on a daily basis.

Nothing of the sorts of clearing of weeds was done here, yet a scenery of plain, red earth stretched as far as you could see.

Today, the “Dragonback Archery Knights”, said to be the elite unit amongst the army, were occupying the training ground.

A kind of giant reptile called the raptorial dragon was the most popular animal to ride here in on the southern continent.

Compared to the “horses” used on the northern continent, the raptorial dragon was slower, but it was twice as big and its power and stamina were beyond compare. Their power was even three to fivefold when you made a comparison between them and the large horses that were used in the armies of the various countries on the northern continent.

As poikilotherms, they had the fatal weakness of becoming less active as soon as the temperature dropped below a certain point, but that weakness rarely was an issue here in on the southern continent.

Accompanied by General Puyol Guillén, Aura let her eyes wander over the knight mustered before her.

She currently wore a military uniform. Her attire was primarily red, the colour representing the royal family, and had golden patterns embroidered on the sleeves and collar, but it principally promoted mobility and resilience.

But even this “unfashionable” uniform gave off a whole different impression when Aura wore it.

Aura’s voluminous breasts and ample bottom couldn’t even be hidden by the thick fabric of the uniform. Not to mention her waist, which was tightened by a thick belt, a necessity for the sword at her side.

Her relatively straitened waist ended up emphasizing the volume of her breasts and bottom.

If Zenjirou were here, he would surely be happy about this “feast for the eyes”.

Needless to say, the knights of the kingdom would never leer at the Queen during a manoeuvre.

A hushed silence overlay the training ground.

“…..”

That very silence told of the high discipline of the knights. It would be one thing for just humans, but every knight before her was mounted on a raptorial dragon.

It was no simple matter to assemble over a hundred raptorial dragon in one place, keep them from neighing excitedly and have not a single one break the formation.

As she was satisfied with the result, Aura nodded once, then softly cracked the short whip in her right hand into her left hand and gave an order.

“Begin.”

“Aye-aye. Begin the manoeuvre!”

General Puyol, standing next to Aura, forwarded her order to the knights with a loud voice matching his imposing stature.

“HOO!”

The knights raised a voice like a bellow, then spurred their raptorial dragons with their whips, ready to show of the results of their daily training.

Then they vigorously displayed the fruit of their practice in front of the Queen and General.

Some charged ahead with a long spear in hand. Some skilfully rushed through an obstacle road with mud and fallen over trees on their raptorial dragons. Some shot arrows at distant targets while still mounted on the raptorial dragon, showing off the prominent dragonback archery.

Aura was not the slightest bit concerned about her face or hair getting dirty from stirred dust and called out to General Puyol beside her.

“Quite formidable. I am impressed you trained them so well.”

The ambitious general lowered his head faithfully on the Queen’s appraisal.

“Yes, thank you. At present, we finally surpassed the 80% mark of the required force. This year, or no later than next year, we will have the proposed count assembled.”

“Replenished up to 80% in five years, huh. Well done, General.”

Aura openly praised General Puyol on a rare occasion. In fact, his achievements were quite admirable.

It had been the knights, the main pillar of the army, who took the most damage in the previous great war.

An immense amount of money and time was needed to replenish the knight troops. They had to raise and train the raptorial dragons while at the same time, their riders had to be brought up, too.

It was indeed a meritorious deed to replenish the original count within five to six years. That said, the replenished troops only consisted of young knights without any real battle experiences. Even if the troops were complete again, they didn't even come near the fighting capacity prior to the war.

General Puyol kept his grim expression even while the Queen praised him, and replied with a shake of the head.

"Please direct these words at the breeders of the dragon stables. This achievement is mainly thanks to them."

Puyol Guillén, known for his ambition in the royal court, was a good commander, who cared for his men on the battlefield or training ground and correctly reported their achievements.

"You are right. I will do so."

Aura honestly consented to General Puyol's sound argument.

The raptorial dragons were raised as riding animals and their greatest inferiority to horses were their lifespan.

A horse had an average lifespan of twenty to thirty years. In comparison, the lifespan of a raptorial dragon was around fifty years. A long life prolonged the deployment in battle, but at the same time, it also prolonged the time a raptorial dragon needed to be ready for battle after birth.

While a horse could technically be used as a warhorse four or five years after its birth, the raptorial dragon needed at least ten years.

In other words, the raptorial dragons assigned to the army in the last five years had already been around the age of five to ten at the end of the war. Or to put it yet another way, they all had "hatched from their eggs during the war".

It had been an extraordinary effort on the breeders' part as they managed to raise and feed the dragons, which ate even more than horses, during the ongoing war, where the budget had been cut drastically, without any casualties.

Anyway, the replenishment of the knight troops, the backbone of the army, was very good news to Aura.

"Come to think of it, it seems like we will be able to increase the military budget for a bit next year. I will let you know the exact number later, so make plans how to use it."

The extra budget for the military was not by chance. Zenjirou had disclosed the tax evasion from the feudal lords with his recalculation.

As a result of a full discussion with the feudal lords over the past few days, Aura managed to increase the national budgeting to a reasonable extent and decreed that the majority of it was to be contributed to the military budget.

Originally, the feudal lords had set aside that money for their own military. It would simply result in a decline of national military strength if that kind of money were to be used for something else than the military budget.

Right now they maintained a reconciliatory stance with the bordering countries, but the situation wasn't so peaceful that they could turn towards disarmament.

General Puyol smiled for the first time today from hearing Aura's words.

"Oho, is that so? Very well. As soon as the numbers are clear, I shall get in contact with the important figures and outline the military requests."

"Yes, do that."

Aura kept her gaze on the manoeuvre of the knights and replied with a nod.

"Understood. Luckily, most of the prominent military brass will be in the capital for the banquet in two days. I presume it will not take all too much time for me to hand in a report."

"?"

General Puyol's utterance made Aura twitch her right hand holding the whip.

The banquet in two days was obviously referring to Zenjirou's debut into higher society.

She had anticipated it of course, but this ambitious general actively sought a connection to the Prince Consort.

(Oh, I wonder how this will turn out)

Her husband had not the slightest bit of ambition while the general was practically a mass of it. On a glance they appeared incompatible like water and oil, but the interesting part about humans was that people like them could become best friends forever.

(I would not want this ambitious man to give him a bad influence, but as his "wife" it is not my place to interfere with his male friendships)

Aura could only stand on the sidelines, but the fact that she wasn't all too worried about it, showed how she had started to trust Zenjirou.

"My little sister is looking forward to it as well. I would very much welcome it if Zenjirou-sama could spare some time for her."

"I see. Then I will tell my husband accordingly."

General Puyol displayed his ambition as open as ever, whereat Aura responded with these word in a calm tone without any agitation.

Chapter 01: Debut into Higher Society

A night banquet arranged by the royal palace.

This event was a periodical social gathering for the upper class, but at the same time the perfect chance to show off the authority of royalty to the kingdom.

On a bit tactless note, it took a tremendous amount of money as it was held at night.

Countless chandeliers in all sizes hung down from the high ceiling to illuminate the large banquet hall, but the candles burning on them were not cheap, even by the noble standards.

“Beeswax” was fabricated in the Carpa Kingdom, too, but they hadn’t succeeded in cultivating honeybees like on Earth, so the harvest of the raw materials was commissioned and importing “plant wax” from countries in the east added transport costs, thus it became fairly expensive at any rate.

Additionally, the chandeliers itself were super luxury items in this world, too. After all, glass manufacture didn’t exist here. The chandeliers were all made out of silver and natural crystals. Even one of the smaller kind was worth a little fortune.

Moreover, the red carpet covering the entire room was an unique item, woven by experts over three generations. And the tall tables, well-stocked with food and drinks, were extravagance pieces, each carved from a single trunk by a skilled carpenter.

All in all, it was a dazzling space that fascinated even lower class nobles, let alone the common people.

In fact, the nobles of the lower class would be excited for the whole next day, just from having “participated in the party in the large banquet hall of the palace last night”.

Zenjirou was setting foot into this kind of banquet hall for the first time ever and he desperately dealt with the greeting flood from the nobles with an affected smile under the light of the chandeliers.

“Let me introduce him to you, Zenjirou. This man is Baron Pantoja. In the previous war, he served as a commander for the knights and now he is providing his services as a feudal lord.”

Aura had her left arm linked with Zenjirou’s right arm and introduced the middle-aged man standing in front of them with these words.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Zenjirou-sama. Her Highness was too good to me in granting me the title of a Baron. My name is Thomas Pantoja.”

“Yes, thank you for your greeting, Baron.”

“My pleasure.”

Zenjirou made a generous nod, whereat the middle-aged man, introduced as Baron Pantoja, raised his lowered head.

Aura, wearing an orange dress without sleeves, corrected the big flower arrangement on the left side of her chest while Baron Pantoja retreated from in front of the Queen and her husband.

Zenjirou watched the Baron leave and made a soft sigh, careful that no one nearby noticed it.

(This is tiring…)

Keeping a correct posture, not forgetting to smile and never adopting the wrong tone. That was all he had to do, yet he felt an unbelievable fatigue because of the unfamiliar clothes and the pressuring glances on him from all sides.

Fortunately, the nobles of this country weren’t so shameless as to greet him continuously without letting him catch his breath, so he somehow managed for now, but if he were to pace himself wrongly, he could end up making a fatal mistake.

His current attire was the formal wardrobe for royalty in the Carpa Kingdom. Wide trousers in white and a type of tunic that was overlapping at the front like Japanese clothes, decorated with a many cords. Over it, he wore a red vest without sleeves.

Appropriate for the Carpa Kingdom, a southern country, the formal wardrobe wasn't all too stifling hot, but the decorative bronze sword at his waist was heavy and the perfumed oil steadying his hair was not only smelly, but itchy, too.

He had already experienced the sword and oil once during the marriage ceremony, but getting used to them wasn't all that easy. To Zenjirou, they only were a bother that added to his agony over time.

During the regardful breathing pause, he memorized the appearance and demeanour of the just introduced person in the corner of his brain.

(Man of medium build in his forties with black hair. Name is Baron Pantoja. An obviously flattering look. If anything, he gave a bad impression… Aw, I wished they would at least give me a business card)

His expression was maintaining a smile while he exclaimed that in his thoughts.

Zenjirou knew the ropes of remembering the faces and names of his business partners from his salaryman days, but it had never been more than five people at once.

In comparison, today a dozen of nobles would get introduced to him. Moreover, there was no custom of "exchanging business cards" like in modern Japan.

A small consolation was that the nobles of the Carpa Kingdom often wore characteristic clothes unlike a salaryman in a suit, thus it was a bit easier to keep them apart.

The fashion culture in the Carpa Kingdom could generally be divided into two groups. The "traditional native dress" that was passed down in the Carpa Kingdom from time immemorial and something like "western clothes" that had swept over from the northern continent in the recent years.

Over time, these two kind of clothing influenced each other and mixed together, so even when it was called a "formal wardrobe", there was a great variety in dresses at relatively slack gatherings like this banquet.

Likewise appropriate for a southern country, the colours were often colourful ones close to the primary colours for both men and women.

Due to that, extremely rude keywords like "fat guy wearing a flower-pattern shirt" or "old lady looking like a purple fir" were floating around in Zenjirou's head.

Judging by Aura's behaviour as she stood next to him, Zenjirou seemed to act without any problems so far. To begin with, a banquet like this required no specific techniques like a dance party, nor did he have to follow a great number of rules like during a public event.

In that way, it was not a bad choice for Mr. superficial-royalty to make his debut into higher society here. In exchange, he was closer to the average noble and besieged with interactions, but that was still a permissible demerit.

While such thoughts crossed his minds, Aura quietly left his side, took a silver goblet from the table and returned to him.

"Zenjirou."

"Oh, thanks, Aura."

Zenjirou took the offered goblet from Aura and realized that he had been rather thirsty.

The goblet was filled with a local wine. It had a low alcohol content, a harsh taste and above all, it was lukewarm, which wasn't really to Zenjirou's liking, but it was enough to refresh his throat that was dry from the sweltering atmosphere.

"Allow me to take care of it."

"Yeah, thanks."

Aura signalized a nearby waiting maid, who was working as a waitress, with her eyes when she saw how Zenjirou had emptied his goblet. The waitress swiftly approached them, took the empty goblet from Zenjirou and left.

As Aura had waited for this moment, where a bit of his nervousness was washed away by the refreshment, she called out to the nobles, who stood at a fair distance.

It was a pair of a man and a woman.

Zenjirou was already familiar with the woman. There was only one woman besides his wife Aura and the waiting maids of the inner palace, whom he got acquainted with, since he had shut himself into the inner palace the whole time after coming into this world.

It was Octavia, the wife of Count Márguez. She wore a modest traditional attire and stood out all the more, since a lot of the present women wore a dress-like wardrobe from the northern continent like Aura, seemingly in fashion right now.

In that case, the plump middle-aged man next to her must be Count Manuel Márguez.

A prominent nobleman of the Carpa Kingdom and the father of Raffaello Márguez, a former candidate for becoming Aura's husband.

Zenjirou observed him, as careful as possible that his gaze wasn't noticed.

(Uwah, I've heard about it before, but their age difference really is like father and daughter. It's a dream of every man to have a beautiful second wife)

Aura suddenly squeezed his right arm stronger when his thoughts wandered into an insolent territory.

Zenjirou flinched for a second, thinking she had read his mind, but recalled right away that it was the sign they had agreed upon beforehand. Namely a signal for "important people, whom she wanted him to remember the face, name and first impression of as best as possible".

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Your Highness Aura. And I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Zenjirou-sama."

"Thank you very much for the invitation today, Your Highnesses."

The couple with the age gap politely lowered their heads, whereat Aura responded with her usual appealing smile and introduced the two of them to Zenjirou.

"Thanks for coming, Count Márguez, Lady Octavia. Let me acquaint you with them, Zenjirou. This is Count Manual Márguez, an important figure in our kingdom. I do not have to introduce Lady Octavia to you, I take it?"

"I've heard only good things about you, Count Márguez. Your wife has taken good care of me."

Zenjirou answered by deliberately throwing out his chest, to which the Márguez couple lowered their heads once more.

"It gladdens me that my wife is serving you so well."

"You honour me, Zenjirou-sama."

At some point, the nearby other nobles had become interested, too, and were looking their way.

The closest one was still ten metre away, so their conversation surely couldn't be overheard, but Zenjirou needed to be prepared to be the center of attention already.

Aura had no intention to embarrass her husband in the public eye as he wasn't used to such occasions, so she took the lead while still linking arms with him.

"Do not be so modest, Count. Your wife is as intelligent and beautiful as they say. I would very much like for you two to continue to aid our country with your skills."

"We are hardly worth of your generous words. Thank you very much."

"Gladly, Your Highness. As long as my meagre abilities can be of use, I will devote myself to it in the future as well."

Zenjirou generally relinquished the conversation to Aura and only gave agreeable responses like "Oho, I see." or "Yes, indeed." when the attention shifted towards him.

Rather avoid leaving a bad impression instead of making a good one was the name of the game. Or even better, he shouldn't leave an impression at all, considering his difficult standing as the Prince Consort.

Thus Zenjirou's debut into higher society made a good start.

However, there was no guarantee that everything would end well even if the banquet got off a good start.

To begin with, the main goal today was to show off how well Aura and Zenjirou got along to the public.

For that reason, she couldn't keep covering for him with a hold on his arm forever.

If she were to continue it, it would start to substantiate the rumour that "Aura was restricting the freedom of her husband".

Therefore they had agreed upon beforehand that they would go their separate ways for a while after they were done with the greetings.

"…Fuh"

Separated from Aura, Zenjirou slowly walked around the hall. Many people gave him curious gazes, but no one dared to approach the royal man.

It was basically considered "impolite" for someone of lower standing to call out to someone of higher standing in this country. And although a bit of discourtesy was put up with at relatively slack gatherings like a banquet, only a few people were allowed to call out to a direct royalty like Zenjirou.

Feudal lords, cabinet ministers or generals were about the only ones that could approach him without impinging the etiquette. But as these people shouldered heavy responsibilities, they excelled at common sense and reading the atmosphere, so almost no one risked to approach a royalty "on their own accord".

For better or worse, it would take a general or feudal lord either bold and despising manners/customs or ambitious to no end and greedily aiming even higher despite his already high standing, to venture it.

(Oh well, guess I'll have to talk to someone)

As a salaryman for a smaller company, Zenjirou had originally not only done office work, but had also negotiated with other companies at home and abroad. He had no problem with initiating contact with someone unknown.

In search for a person he could safely call out to as a royalty, he let his gaze slowly wander around the hall. At that time.

"Excuse me, Zenjirou-sama. May I have a bit of your time?"

A well-built man in the prime of his life came up to him from the side and called out to him like that while kneeling down on one knee.

(Eh… EHH? No way, someone approached me? Who's this guy!?)

Zenjirou encountered a situation said to be "technically impossible" in his manner lessons and fell into an inward panic. Even so, he reflexively tensed up his expression and slowly turned to the kneeing man.

"Yes…?"

Upon turning around, there kneeled a man down on one knee on top of the carpet.

The man had a well-trained build so huge that Zenjirou could tell on a glance that he was "tall" even when he was kneeling. His body was clad in boorish, black clothes decorated with golden threads, which was kind of inappropriate for a banquet. Zenjirou somehow recalled from the depth of his memories that it was the official uniform for a high ranking officer in the military of the Carpa Kingdom.

Judging by the numerous tassels on his left arm, this giant seemed to occupy a top-ranking position in the current military.

He truly looked like a "knight" as he kneeled on the red carpet under the light of the chandeliers.

And not the kind of "knight" that appeared in a fairytale as a fledgling prince, but the kind of "knight" that fiercely protected his country and found his raison d'être in braveries on the battlefield while knowing a bare minimum of manners.

Zenjirou frantically put the information in his head into order while he looked down on the kneeling "knight".

The only ones, who were barely allowed to call out to him, were important feudal lords, palace authorities like cabinet ministers or military officers with the rank of a general.

And even if someone were to approach him, it would be a bold man that more or less paid no attention to etiquette.

Or otherwise an overly ambitious man, who assertively sought a connection to the Prince Consort even on the risk of falling into disgrace with him.

Military officer, bold, ambitious. These three keywords engaged with each other and formulated the name of a man, whom Aura had warned him about in advance, inside Zenjirou's head.

"Oh, Sir Puyol. What is it?"

Zenjirou cleared his throat once, then spoke out the name of the man.

General Puyol Guillén.

He had heard this name numerous times before.

There was no way, he wouldn't be aware of the man, who had been the other candidate for becoming Aura's husband apart from Sir Raffaello Márguez. Aura, too, had often described him as a "dangerous character".

"Yes, I have this small gift that I would very much like to offer to you, Zenjirou-sama. For that very reason, I have called out to you, fully aware it was against etiquette. It is but a humble present, but it would be a great honour for me if you were to accept it."

General Puyol Guillén, the commander of the dragonback archery knights of the Carpa Kingdom, looked straight up to the Prince Consort standing in front of him as he said that while still kneeling on top of the red carpet.

A prominent general of the country kneeled before the Prince Consort and directly talked to him.

Of course this scene would attract the attention of the others. At some point, the nobles had stopped their chit-chatting and sent curious gazes their way. Zenjirou noticed that and inwardly broke out in a cold sweat, thinking "how troublesome", then cleared his throat once with an affected cough.

(Aw, damn it. I didn't expect this. I've to improvise everything now? Give me a break…)

Zenjirou was the type of man, who dealt with negotiations or presentations during his salaryman days by preparing as best as he could and writing up a sheet with anticipated questions in advance.

People like that were often somewhat weak to "unexpected" situations like this one, where they had to improvise everything.

Even so, he frantically compared his superficial knowledge with his current situation in his head and tried to derive the best course of action.

(Ehm, this a banquet, so it's somewhat lax, I think? And I'm royalty while this guy's a general…)

He unconsciously called General Puyol "this guy" in his thoughts.

Although Zenjirou knew that it wasn't admirable to think bad of someone he met for the first time, he wasn't so honourable that he could be neutral to the former husband candidate of his beloved wife.

Hiding his feelings behind a mask, Zenjirou broke the ice with harmless words.

"General, there's no need to kneel in such a place."

"Aye-aye. Excuse me."

General Puyol smoothly stood up on Zenjirou's words.

Zenjirou quelled his urge to back off as the general stood dignified in front of him.

He was huge. One head taller than Zenjirou, who was 1,72m tall, so his height must actually surpass 1,80m. It was most likely somewhere around 1,85m or at worse, something close to 2m.

His body weight seemed to surpass a hundred kilogram, too. And of course not from fat, but muscles. The giant body was perfectly trained for battle.

“Then go ahead. You said something about a present?”

Zenjirou looked the one-head taller General Puyol straight into the eyes and organized the information inside his head.

He was taught in advance about the possibility that someone comes up with a present to him in this place. It seemed that this world shared the moral concept of gaining someone’s favour through presents.

(As I recall, I can’t turn it down without a good reason. The prickly question is how to accept it)

If he were to look too overjoyed, the other party would expect a compensation concurrent with that “joy” and if he were to look disappointed, he would embarrass the other party in public.

Zenjirou again felt the enormous pressure of his current standing, where his mere words or expression for accepting something could affect the fate of those around him.

General Puyol was ignorant to Zenjirou’s inner turmoil and lowered his head once more with “Yes”, then signalized a young knight, apparently his subordinate, behind him with his eyes.

At the receiving end of that look, the young knight came forward to the side of the general with small steps, carrying a long and narrow object wrapped in a white cloth in both hands, and handed over that wrapped item to General Puyol obediently.

Seeing that, Zenjirou forgot his affected and inexpressive look and widened his eyes a bit.

(Eh!? He brought the actual item with him, not just a certificate?)

Zenjirou had been told that the usual procedure of giving something to someone in such a place was to first hand over a certificate here and then send the actual item to the residence at a later date. After all, it concerned presents from nobility or royalty. It was not all that unusual to give away a well-bred “raptorial dragon” or a summer residence.

Of course it wasn’t out of question to directly hand over items of hand-held size like jewellery or treasured swords, but it was rarely practiced.

Because it saved one the embarrassment if the brought item was rejected on the spot.

“Please take a look, Zenjirou-sama.”

While Zenjirou’s eyes were still widened in surprise, General Puyol unwrapped the cloth in an accustomed manner and revealed the object under it.

(What’s that? A… bow?)

Zenjirou was puzzled upon seeing the object. It was a rustic stick that was curved elaborately. To him, it only looked like a practical “bow” without any ornaments.

As to confirm his impression, General Puyol said proudly.

“This is a ‘dragon bow’, made by a prominent craftsman in our country.”

The nearby nobles, who had been watching the scene so far, let out surprised “Ohh” sounds upon these words.

Apparently this so-called “dragon bow” was something so impressive that even the nobles raised admired voices.

Zenjirou took another close look at the “dragon bow” in Puyol’s hand, but it still didn’t look like anything wonderous.

As it was to be brought into the palace, the holes at each end for the bowstring were filled with something like ochroid clay onto which the royal emblem was engraved and its entirety was only half as large as a Japanese bow for archery. In the eyes of an amateur, it appeared extremely undependable.

General Puyo must have realized that Zenjirou understood nothing about the “dragon bow” from his weak reaction.

He eloquently started to explain with a low voice.

“The ‘dragon bow’ is put together from a thin wood plank as the basis, the unbent tendon and scraped rib from a ‘raptorial dragon’.

As you can see, it has only half the size of the longbow for the archery troops, but it exceeds the longbow in both power and range.

It also is easier to wield due to its smaller size and in the hands of a skilled man, it becomes a rather quick and precise weapon. It would be no exaggeration to say that it is the strongest weapon for a rider.”

A bow made by combining not-run-of-the-mill materials. The kind that was commonly known as a composite bow.

Something similar had existed in the history of Earth, too, and had certainly proved itself in battle.

“However, only a small handful of knight can call a dragon bow their own. The reason is that only the flexible tendons and bones from still growing, young ‘raptorial dragons’ can be used for the bow, so the materials are extremely valuable. Likewise, it takes a lot of time and effort to manufacture a single one.”

Generally, only young raptorial dragons at the age from five to seven were considered to supply the materials for the “dragon bow”, because the bones of a full-grown raptorial dragon became hard and solid, losing their flexibility. The tendons, too, suffered the same harmful influence, albeit not as bad as the bones.

Zenjirou was enlightened about the “dragon bow” through General Puyol’s explanation and his cheeks twitched.

The “dragon bow” had been unknown to him, but he had already received an explanation about how precious the “raptorial dragon” was in this country.

And also about that fact that breeders at the stables were still going to great lengths every day as to replenish the required count of raptorial dragons, which had greatly declined in the previous war, for the military.

These precious “raptorial dragons” were killed at a young age and salvaged for materials for weapons. Even if five “dragon bows” could be gained from the death of a single, young “raptorial dragon”, these five bows had to produce equal results as one mature “raptorial dragon” or it wouldn’t be worth it the costs.

Zenjirou didn’t know the exact number of bows that could be made from a single dragon, but it couldn’t be all that many, considering the nuance in General Puyol’s words.

“Zenjirou-sama?”

General Puyol called his name wondering, as he noticed that he behaved strangely, whereat Zenjirou asked with a voice as flat as possible.

“One question, General. Can anyone use this ‘dragon bow’ with ease?”

General Puyol answered honestly without perceiving the intention of his question.

“No. As it has a considerable range and power for its small frame, it is not uncommon that even an average soldier has trouble drawing it satisfactory.”

Zenjirou was about to sigh towards the expected answer, but withheld it.

Its power was authentic, but it was hard to handle and materials for it were rather valuable, so it was a rare weapon. Zenjirou wouldn’t expect that it was alright to have even one of them lying around unused in his room.

However, it seemed to be have an appropriate “status” for offering it to a royalty, judging by the reaction of the others. How could he turn it down while keeping a commotion to a minimum?

Zenjirou mustered all of his wits and answered while carefully wracking his brain.

“I really appreciate your thoughtfulness in offering me something so valuable, General. However, as an experienced general it should strike you that I’m a powerless man, who wouldn’t even add to the fighting strength on the battlefield.”

He spread his arms left and right, then said that as to show off his body as proof.

His body was clad in the unceremonious native attire and an experienced soldier should at least be able to tell that he was no soldier-material from a glance at his small hands or neck that shoot out of the cuffs.

“Yes, but…”

General Puyol tried to say something, but Zenjirou interrupted him as he continued.

“Thus it would be a waste for me to accept this bow.

General Puyol, I presume you’ve some knights under you, who have yet to obtain a ‘dragon bow’. So could you pass that ‘dragon bow’ to your knight, who is the most able with the bow and the most loyal to the royal family amongst them?

That way, the bow will find a satisfying purpose for me.”

For a while, a hushed silence hung over the hall.

“…..Very well. I promise you that the bow will definitely be granted to someone worth of your regard, Zenjirou-sama.”

After a long silence, General Puyol deeply bowed his head while still holding the “dragon bow” with both hands.

Queen Aura had watched the fuss from a distance and made a sigh of relief in response to the neat resolving of the situation.

(Good. He somehow managed to turn it down)

If he had accepted the bow right there, it would have become extremely troublesome.

It wouldn’t have posed a problem when it were a prestigious weapon like a treasure sword or decorative spear, but if he had accepted a practical weapon, it would imply that he was ready to use it, too.

And then it would become extremely difficult to turn down an invitation from General Puyol for practice or a hunting outing next time.

By declaring that “he had no intention of using the bow” himself, Zenjirou’s reputation certainly had been lowered, but he hadn’t rejected it curtly and rather spared the general from an embarrassment, too, as he “lent the bow to a worthy knight after asserting the right of ownership”.

Although it made him a slight disappointment as a man, the situation was resolved without embarrassing or offending anyone.

In Aura’s eyes, it was a nearly perfect result.

In the worst case, she had been prepared to step in by herself and salvage the situation imperious. Doing so would have undoubtedly promoted the rumour that “the Queen was henpecking her husband” instead.

“He handled that quite promising, Your Highness.”

Standing next to her, Count Márguez called out to her smiling.

“Indeed. Forgive me, Count, we were in the middle of a conversation.”

Aura corrected the flower decoration on the left side of her chest with her hand and faced Count Márguez, who wouldn’t leave her side for a while now, again.

The plump Count smiled happily and narrowed his eyes.

“No worries. You are newlywed, so it is only natural that your eyes unintentionally chase Zenjirou-sama. I am glad to see that you are two are happy together.”

He shook his head and said so a bit playful.

“Thank you for your kind words.”

Aura showed a wry smile to the words of the Count, which sounded a bit sarcastic, and wrinkled her nose a bit.

She returned her gaze to Zenjirou and General Puyol right away.

General Puyol entrusted the “dragon bow” to his subordinate and continued to speak with Zenjirou, not the least discouraged after this.

They seemed to have a relatively harmless conversation from then on as Zenjirou, too, talked with a calm expression and without problems.

Nonetheless, General Puyol wouldn’t be called the “Insatiable Wolf” if he could learn a lesson from one or two failures in his ambitions.

Aura pricked up her ears to the General’s words from afar.

“…Indeed, your role is to make sure to leave offspring behind, so there is no need to expose yourself to danger on the battlefield. Please leave that front to us.

And while we are on the subject, in the event of conceiving a child with Her Highness Aura that inherits the royal blood, you would need a ‘concubine’ next to give birth to a heir for your very own name, in my humble opinion.”

After the offensive with the present, General Puyol launched an arranged marriage offensive, whereat Aura, listening in on them from a distance, contorted her face for a moment.

General Puyol couldn’t even see Aura and openly sharpened his offensive towards Zenjirou with a dignified bearing.

“To change the topic a bit, the Guillén Family has inherited the noble blood of the royal family, albeit to a small extent, as you may know.

Today, I have brought my little sister with me and on this occasion, I would very much like to introduce her to you, Zenjirou-sama.”

The topic hadn’t changed at all.

His promotion was so straight to the point that one might say that even the selling of a prostitute had more introductory remarks.

Aura watched the scene from a distance and sensed an impending crisis. She should definitely interfere in this.

This wasn’t good. Her husband was far more familiar with the social intercourse than she had anticipated, but she didn’t think that Zenjirou, who only just made his debut into higher society, could go against General Puyol’s direct attack that bordered on a breach of rules.

(I have to do something…!)

The determined Aura was about to step forward when Count Márguez, who had watched the whole scene with a smile, called out to her with a calm voice from the side.

“Oh, come to think of it, I have yet to exchange greetings with General Puyol today. Your Highness, I know we are in the middle of a conversation, but may I excuse myself?”

“!?”

Aura stopped from the count’s affected words and turned around.

She didn’t know what the count was after, but his offer was a real lifesaver for her.

If she were to say “Then let me accompany you” now, she could interfere with the marriage offensive from the insatiable wolf without being interpreted as “forcing her way into the conversation of her husband”.

(What are you scheming, Count? Are you trying to gain favour with me?)

As she couldn’t discern the count’s intention, she was a bit worried, but even more so, she couldn’t stand to sit back and watch the conversation between Zenjirou and General Puyol any longer.

She had no time to waste.

“In that case, let me accompany you.”

Making a prompt decision, Aura accepted the helping hand from Count Márguez without argument.

The higher society parties often held in the palace were called a “battlefield without swords”, but that was a slightly exaggerated expression.

For most nobles, these parties were nothing but a relaxing place, where they simply could meet up with other nobles and enjoy some gossip. Eating delicious food, drinking good wine and respectively rejoicing at the sight of dressed-up ladies or gentlemen.

This graceful playground for the nobles was primarily a party and very few of all the nobles perceived it as a “battlefield without swords”.

However, this fact was hardly any comfort for Zenjirou.

At present, General Puyol Guillén, who had boldly called out to him, and his little sister Fatima stood in front of him.

And Count Manual Márgeuz and his wife Octavia had taken up position catty-corner from him and joined the conversation as they had come to greet General Puyol.

Lastly, Queen Aura stood besides Zenjirou with her hand on his arm as she had come over under the pretext of accompanying Count Márguez for the greeting.

The people that had gathered around him were all of the rare kind that treated this social gathering as a “battlefield without swords”.

“Well then, let me introduce her. This is my little sister Fatima.”

“My name is Fatima Guillén. It is a great honour to be granted an audience with you, Zenjirou-sama.”

On General Puyol’s introduction, the young girl with her long, black hair tied in a ponytail lowered her head in perfect line with etiquette.

Like the majority of the people in the Carpa Kingdom, her skin colour had a brown tone and her somewhat almond-shaped eyes and hair shared the same jet black colour.

(Oh, what a beauty)

Zenjirou thought so to himself while he “looked up” to Fatima as she raised her head. Yes, he had to look up to her.

From his position, Fatima’s head was above his. Not by the result of her overbearingly standing on higher grounds, but simply from the fact that she was taller than Zenjirou.

Well, her brother, General Puyol, had a height close to two metre, so it might be natural that his sister Fatima, born from the same parents, had a tall figure as well.

Her height easily surpassed 1,80m with long legs that comprised nearly half of that height. The volume of her breasts and bottom was meagre, but her waist was even tighter. In Zenjirou’s world, her figure and features would pass her as a fashion model.

“Oho, so you’re his sister. You certainly resemble him.”

“Yes, I am often told that.”

Being told “you resemble your brother” by Zenjirou made her nervousness go away and she smiled happily. If that expression of hers wasn’t feigned, then “resembling her brother” was a pleasant evaluation for her.

(Does that mean these siblings get along well? Guess I’ll ask Aura later on)

“Zenjirou-sama, speaking of the young lady of the Guillén Family, Lady Fatima is known throughout the country for her beauty and intelligence. Come to think of it, it feels like it has been a while since I met you face-to-face, Fatima-dono, even though I frequently attend social gatherings. You have become even more beautiful.”

It was Count Márguez, who interjected like that after he had intruded upon Zenjirou and General Puyol earlier.

“Thank you very much, Count Márguez. The reason for that is that I learned good manners by serving at the residence of Marquis Pernia until recently.”

He joined the conversation by the means of a compliment, whereat the young Fatima reacted with a spirited smile head-on.

As Fatima wanted to appeal to Zenjirou now, Count Márguez was nothing but a “hindrance” to her, no matter how much he showered her with praise. Her originally almond-shaped eyes smoothly assumed a stern look.

On the other hand, General Puyol, far older than his little sister, was well aware that it was foolish to make an enemy out of the cunning count here.

“Haha, Fatima, do not make a face like that. The Count is not the type of man, who would make a pass at you. After all, he already has the perfect wife at his side.”

He didn’t ignore the precipitous attitude of his sister and rather dared to make it the topic of a joke, tapping her delicate shoulder with his globular, huge hand.

“D- Dear Brother…!”

Fatima attempted to fight back for a moment, but when he glared at her at close range, she immediately unsaid her previous remark with a stiff expression.

“I- Indeed. Next to Octavia-sama, even I feel like losing confidence.”

“By no means… I am not the youngest anymore. You are much prettier, Fatima-sama.”

Fatima played along with her brother’s joke and said that while showing a forced smile, whereas Octavia blushed her cheeks a little bit.

Octavia was twenty-four years old and married. Going by that, her reaction would normally earn her some criticism in form of “Think of your age!”, but one reason for her popularity with the great majority of the opposite sex was that this gesture still looked becoming even now. Likewise, it must be the reason why she earned the loathing from some few of the same sex.

As one of these few, Fatima kept her impression of her, namely “Geh, this granny is playing the good girl”, to herself

“You are too modest, Octavia-sama.”

and only replied with that and a smile.

Sarcasm didn’t work on the beautiful woman with an eternal innocence. On the other hand, if Fatima were to make a harsher verbal attack, she would appear as the bad guy, so Octavia was an invincible existence in higher society. Even as the polar opposite of sweet temper, Fatima knew better to pick a fight with the invincible lady.

General Puyol had smoothed over his sister’s reckless attitude as a funny story and thus continued to promote her undaunted.

“Well, my sister certainly lacks behind Octavia-sama, but she definitely shows some promise. Her singing and dancing is not all that bad and she has experience in serving, so she can at least fulfil the duties of a waiting maid.”

His words were obviously directed at Zenjirou, but the one replying to them at once wasn't him, but the brave and reliable woman at his side, ever since she had regrouped with him earlier.

"Oho, it is a rare, but admirable occurrence that someone from a prestigious family like the Guillén Family would serve under another noble to learn good manners. In the future, she might come to serve as my chambermaid."

"…Yes, please regard her with favour then, Your Highness Aura."

As Aura intercepted his advance, the general faltered for a moment, then replied with these words.

It wasn't all that profitable even when his sister served as Aura's chambermaid. Serving under Zenjirou's was worth it, since there was a high chance of developing an intimate relationship.

But "serving under the Queen" had more prestige than "serving under the Prince Consort". Aura took the wind out of the general's sails by saying that.

Zenjirou listened to the exchange between Aura and General Puyol from the sidelines and sighed inwardly for the nth times.

(Seriously, just gimme a break here…)

He could somehow catch his breath thanks to Aura coming to his aid, but a cold sweat that wasn't due to the sultry night was spreading extensively under this formal dress.

Although General Puyol didn't directly say "take my sister for a concubine", the obvious and non-stop promotion of his sister was terrific.

Zenjirou might have let slip some kind of promise by now to bring this situation to an end if Aura hadn't come to his help midway.

"Well, to change the topic a bit, what kind of woman is your type, Zenjirou-sama? Needless to say, Her Highness is your number one, but perhaps you have a number two or three?"

Contrary to his words, the topic didn't change at all again. General Puyol attacked head-on. Only his approach had changed, but the topic itself hadn't changed a bit.

He had quite the guts to ask about his preference in women when his wife Aura stood right next to him. Of course the royalty in this kingdom wasn't monogamous, so the common sense from modern Japan didn't apply here, but even so, jealousy amongst a couple must be common in this world, too?

Zenjirou barely resisted the urge to check for Aura's reaction. If he were to look at her now, it would spread rumours that "Zenjirou-sama was consulting Her Highness Aura about how to answer".

Still, what was he supposed to answer here then? On an emotional level, he would say "Nope, there aren't any. I'm finally getting along with my beautiful wife, so don't wreck it now.", but he knew that this wasn't a place, where he could answer honestly like that.

"Mm, I never spared it a thought so far."

Zenjirou couldn't afford to remain silent for too long, so he muttered that for now to smooth it over. It was then Count Márguez, who opened his mouth to his careless slip of tongue even before General Puyol.

"Hahaha. My wife had already told me about the close relationship between Her Highness and Zenjirou-sama, but it seems that the rumours were an understatement, rather than an exaggeration. Zenjirou-sama is quite delighted with Her Highness and does not even pay attention to any other woman."

Saved by the bell. Zenjirou felt so relieved that he was about to inadvertently sink down on the spot, and responded to Count Márguez kind of reflexive.

"Stop bantering with me, Count. Well, I can't deny it, though."

Count Márguez widened his eyes affected upon Zenjirou's words and laughed.

"Dear me! I guess the Carpa bloodline is secured then. Now that is wonderful."

He burst out into an affected laughter.

"….."

With such an obvious attitude, even General Puyol noticed that Count Márguez was supporting Zenjirou with all his might.

Aura stood reserved next to her husband and remained quiet for now, but she, too, would surely go on the counterattack for her husband if the advances on him got too fierce. In other words, General Puyol was on his own here.

He didn't know where and when it went wrong, but the results he could expect now wouldn't correspond with the risk they shouldered, even if he were to push on. In the worst case, he might end up earning the wrath of Aura or Count Márguez if he were to continue his advances recklessly here.

When word got around that "General Puyol was at loggerheads with Queen Aura and Count Márguez", it was likely that foreign countries would start plotting something.

His ambition was to attain power in the "flourishing" Carpa Kingdom, not to rule a "ruined" Carpa Kingdom.

It was time to pull back now. A quick judgement, namely knowing when to stop, saved one's life. That held true for both the battlefield and the royal court.

"Indeed, that is wonderful above all else. Her Highness found a great companion."

General Puyol clapped his sister twice on the back, a sign for "appeal time over", and adopted the new topic from Count Márguez by agreeing to it.

"Yeah, he is the best husband I could ever ask for. I am blessed with capable retainers like you and found a wonderful husband in Zenjirou. I dare to say that I am the most fortunate ruler in the western region, no, on the whole southern continent."

Aura sensed from General Puyol's attitude that he was laying down the arms for now, and laughed like that with a slightly mellow voice.

"Hahaha. The most fortunate on the continent, you say? It makes me a bit uncomfortable when you flatter us this much."

"No, Count. You better not get too conceited. I am afraid that the 'fortune' Her Highness speaks of is mainly referring to Zenjirou-sama. Our strength is insignificant to it."

"I see! Our loyalty, too, might only pale into insignificance in comparison with the perfect Prince Consort that Zenjirou-sama is."

Afterwards they fired bitter remarks at each other and spent a relatively peaceful time together without anyone going on the offence or defence.

* * *

"It's over…!"

Zenjirou returned late at night from the banquet, uttered this words filled with a commingling of emotions and flopped himself in the black leather couch.

The living room was illuminated by the LED floor lamps like always. Matching with his return, the waiting maids had prepared the ice fan and its breeze cooled down his hot body. He really felt "at home" by sitting on the familiar couch.

In other words, he had adapted himself so good in this one month here that he perceived the inner palace as his "home". His adaptive capacity was surprisingly good.

"Sorry to have put you through all that trouble, Zenjirou. But it was worth it.

You presented yourself in public and surely dulled the rumours about discord between us or me taking away your freedom. Though, we will probably never be able to complete get rid of such rumours."

Responding like that, Aura, too, sat down on the couch somewhat exhausted while still wearing her orange dress.

As a born royalty, she ought to be far more used to such occasions than Zenjirou, but it naturally tired her as well.

Unlike Zenjirou, who had his hands full with himself, Aura had been vigilant from beginning to end as to support her husband in one situation after another. It was a though role that wouldn't even compare to Zenjirou's.

Aura, sitting on the couch, turned her head numerous times, so it dishevelled her red hair that shone glossy from the perfumed oil, and eased the stiffness in her neck.

"I see. That's good. Then I can leisurely shut myself in again for some time. At any rate… my eyes still feel weird."

Along with a sigh of relief, Zenjirou revealed this and repeatedly batted his eyelashes a few times while both his arms rested on the back of the couch. For a while now, his eyes had been aching and feeling bad.

Most likely, his eyes had been hurt from the unfamiliar light of the chandeliers.

No matter how much chandeliers they had, the light from it was nothing more than the flame of candles. The brightness from the flames was limited and a little breeze easily rocked them already. Quite a shortcoming.

A lacking amount of light, numerous rocking light sources and furthermore, reflectors out of silver hanging down from the chandeliers to spread out the sparse light even a bit. Of course all this had a bad influence on the eyes.

That said, only Zenjirou seemed to suffer from that. Aura relaxed in front of him and it didn't look like she had any problems with her eyes. His discomfort must originate from his adaptation to the culture of modern Japan after all.

"Argh, my vision's still kind of blurry."

While grumbling like that, Zenjirou took off his shoes without standing up from the couch.

Since the Carpa Kingdom had a climate of high temperatures and humidity that exceeded modern Japan, their culture allowed for being barefooted indoors, but banquets or dance parties were self-evidently a different matter.

Taking off the indoor linen-shoes and long socks, he let his feet get some fresh air for the first time in a few hours and unconsciously made a sigh of relief.

"So refreshing…"

Thinking back on it now, ever since his actual transfer to this world, he had never worn any other shoes besides his slippers until today, apart from the marriage ceremony. After such a long time, he realized the full-scale of his shut-in life.

Although the climate was different, it astonished him that his legs were worn out just from walking around the palace for a few hours in linen-shoes, even though he had worn solid shoes and business socks for more than fifteen hours a day during his salaryman days a mere month ago.

(I guess I've to reassess my lifestyle. I'm no princess, so I don't want to get weak feet, which won't allow me to walk well, at my age)

While such thoughts crossed his mind, the barefooted Zenjirou next cast off his vest and opened up his overlapping shirt.

"Fuh…"

The cold breeze from the ice fan blew onto his liberated chest and he closed his eyes pleased.

He had some experience in verbal disputes from negotiations during his salaryman days, but his current fatigue didn't even come close to the one from back then. The strong pressure from occupying a position of influence like "royalty" couldn't be compared to that of a low salaryman and must have weighted heavily on him.

"Well, I'll get in the bath soon anyway…"

Making such an excuse to himself, he unravelled the sash-like strap around his waist and shed the overlapping shirt right here, too. Although he knew it was unbecoming, he couldn't resist the temptation to free his tired body from the clothes.

"Mm, let me get comfortable as well."

Following her husband's example as he had slovenly undressed up to his pants, Aura, too, stood up from the couch, seized behind her head with both hands and undid the knot of her dress. The orange dress slipped down her skin with a small rustling from just that.

As it was royal custom, she had previously been helped by waiting maids to change her clothes, but ever since she shared her bedroom with Zenjirou, she often refrained from having the waiting maids help her take off her clothes in the light of Zenjirou's dislike about others entering the room.

The couple respectively got half-naked. Their relationship wasn't so fresh that they would get embarrassed about it now, but it wasn't so dried up that they would ignore it either.

"Oh…"

Zenjirou had thrown himself completely exhausted on the couch earlier, but now he sat up abruptly and gave his half-naked wife a lecherous gaze.

Aura showed a small smile of satisfaction as her self-respect was stimulated by her husband's look, and confidently walked through the living room to the refrigerator in the corner, still half-naked.

"Zenjirou."

In a perfectly accustomed manner, she took two chilled towel from the refrigerator and threw one at Zenjirou.

"Mm, thanks."

Sweat and dirt aside, a steaming hot towel would have been better to wipe the perfumed oil in their hair or around their neck than a chilled towel, but they couldn't stand for wiping their current hot bodies with a steaming towel.

Aura returned and stood beside the couch. While she wiped the sweat and perfumed oil on her body with the chilled towel, she called out to Zenjirou, who was likewise wiping his face with the chilled towel.

"Well then, I know you are tired, but let me ask you while your memories is still fresh. So, did anyone of the nobles you met at the banquet leave a particular impression on you?"

Zenjirou removed the towel from his face and brooded for a while in response to the somewhat sudden question of his wife.

"Left an impression on me… Hmm, I think there were some, but the Guillén siblings took the spotlight in the end. To be honest, I don't really remember anyone but them."

Aura must have anticipated that answer to some extent. She showed a smile and sat down next to Zenjirou.

"I figured as much. These siblings certainly are imposing. Then let me hear about the brother, General Puyol first. What was your first impression of that man?"

"Ah…. Mhm, General Puyol, hmm…"

As his wife looked at him from the side, Zenjirou averted his gaze with an awkward expression.

He had excepted to be asked that question, but at the same time, he had feared to be asked that question.

Nonetheless, it didn't appear like he could bluff it out, seeing how his wife kept her gaze fixated on him.

After resolutely making a big sigh, he honestly confessed while still avoiding to meet her gaze.

"Ah… Uhm… Well, what can I say, I'm a man, too, so in all honesty, I can't deny that I hold some prejudice against him and Raffaello Márguez. I haven't even met Raffaello Márgeuz yet, but I already don't have a favourable impression of him…"

"….."

Aura unconsciously widened her eyes on the words of her husband that were a repentance in a way.

"I see, these two are a special case to you… Fufu."

She stifled her emerging smile of happiness from his confession.

Puyol Guillén and Raffaello Márguez were the names of the former candidates for Aura's husband.

Aura felt her husband's jealousy in his words of "holding a prejudice" against these two and realized that a not so tasteful "emotion of delight" emerged from inside her chest.

In the eyes of the wife, the jealousy of her husband towards “men that had a relation to her” was a sign of affection and to be honest, she was rather pleased about it.

For a moment, Aura was driven by the urge to embrace her husband, but she remembered that he rather dislike the smell of the “perfumed oil” and gave up at the last second.

It was wiser to wait with their usual intimate physical contact until after the bath, as she didn’t want to offend her husband by something so trivial.

Aura kept an appropriate distance, smiled at Zenjirou sitting next to her and pressed for a continuation of the topic.

“It is alright. I am not so thoughtless as to blindly accept your opinion. So just speak your mind.”

Apparently he really couldn’t avoid it. Zenjirou resigned himself to it, turned to Aura sitting next to him and started to speak slightly beside the purpose.

“Aw, geez, fine. Then I’ll be honest. Let’s see, my first impression of General Puyol was that he’s the ‘type to only have either enemies or allies’.”

“Hmm, only enemies or allies, huh.”

She somewhat understood what he wanted to say, but his words were lacking a concreteness, so she coloured her eyes in curiosity and asked again.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you know, I mean, he was frigging overwhelming and zestful and made not the slightest attempt to hide it. On top of that, he spoke his desires out so openly that it surprised me.

How should I say? He’s not afraid to make enemies as long as it achieves his goals. But he seems quite charismatic, so he should’ve a lot of allies, too.

So I think that all the people related to him are either friendly or hostile towards him. In the end, very few people close to him will remain neutral. He strikes me as that type of person.”

“I see… I understand what you are getting at.”

Aura nodded curt on his explanation.

It was a bit rude to her husband, but his evaluation was more spot-on than she had expected.

And in fact, General Puyol, a man frank about his ambition, had a lot of devotees starting with the military, but in exchange, a lot of people hated him, too.

However, the evaluation of “not afraid to make enemies” was kind of undue. General Puyol was a soldier and at the same time, a noble from a prestigious family. He wasn’t so heedless as to recklessly make enemies at the royal court.

In front of people, whom he shouldn’t make an enemy out of, he was at least able to put on an insincere smile.

Zenjirou’s “prejudice” must have come into play here. He unconsciously perceived the man, who had formerly been a candidate for becoming his wife’s husband, as a rival, searched for a weakness in him and exaggerated his story.

As he had said himself before, it was by no means an admirable attitude. However, he was aware of that himself and his prudence was good enough that he could loathe himself for it, so it wasn’t an issue worth mentioning.

As his wife, Aura would’ve just to warn him if he stretched a point.

To begin with, it was absolutely natural as a human to harbour dark emotions towards a person that was deeply involved with his lover.

“Then what do you think of Fatima Guillén, the little sister? Let me hear your honest opinion. Were my eyes playing a trick on me or were you a bit fascinated by her, mh?”

In Aura’s eyes certainly flashed a bit of a gloomy emotion as she asked that.

“Eh? W- Wait a sec. Aura?”

Zenjirou sensed the jealousy hidden behind his wife’s roguish smile and unconsciously backed off on the couch in a timid manner.

Chapter 02: The Emissary from the Twin Kingdom

A few months had passed since Zenjirou made his debut into higher society at the banquet without any problems.

Even in Carpa Kingdom, a southern country, the days with temperatures of over forty degrees during the day and over thirty-five degrees during the night didn't last forever.

Recently the highest temperature during the day was a bit over thirty degrees and during the night, the average temperature dropped down to around twenty-five degrees. It were pleasant times.

With temperatures like that, the fan was good enough during the day even without ice and the nights weren't stifling even without countermeasures against the heat.

The Carpa Kingdom didn't have easily distinguishable "four seasons" like Japan, but various changes could be spotted from a look out of the window of the inner palace.

When Zenjirou had just transferred into this world, the flower bed had been filled with big-bloomed yellow or red flowers, but now flowers with small blue or purple petals were blooming on it and the shadows from the sunlight had grown a bit longer, too. Likewise, the gnats he had fought off with the bug repellent on the window ledge a few months ago were spotted fewer times now and the kind of birds, chirping during the evening, changed as well.

There was not enough change to warrant an assignment of "four season", but one may roughly call this a "change of season".

Anyway, it was certain that it had become remarkable more comfortable compared to his arrival.

However, Zenjirou currently was in no state to fully enjoy this calm season.

He slept, curled up in a ball on the bed like a foetus, in the dark bedroom with all the wooden shutters of the windows closed since noon.

"Hah, Hah, Hah…"

His breathing was rough and his exhalation hot. His cheeks were flushed and a constant sweat oozed from his forehead and neck. Even when it had gotten colder, the temperature should still be around thirty degrees during the day, yet his body was covered by a down-filled quilt up to his chin and still shivered from an unbearable coldness even in this situation.

Before long, an electronic sound unknown to this world quietly beeped under the quilt.

"Uhh…"

Zenjirou barely caught that sound and rummaged about under the blanket, then took out the thermometer pinched under his armpit and held it up to his face.

[38.3 °C]

The number displayed on the digital thermometer was two degrees above his average body temperature.

* * *

Zenjirou was down with a fever.

The first actions Aura took after she received these news shortly before lunch, was to prohibit the waiting maids working in the inner palace from leaving the inner palace and to check her own constitution.

Of course she was worried about her sick husband, but she was a Queen. Her own well-being took priority over nursing the Prince Consort.

Aura had suspended her duties for now and returned to her own chamber in the palace. There she immediately called for the royal court physician to get herself examined.

Aura sat in a chair woven from vines with her mouth opened widely to show her throat. The old physician told her “Yes, thank you” and she closed her mouth.

“How is it?”

“Yes, everything is alright. Or at least, you are showing no symptoms at this point, Your Highness.”

The old physician showed a soft smile and answered Aura’s simple question.

“I see. Well done.”

Aura kept her stern and daunting expression upon the physician’s answer, but inwardly she made a sigh of relief.

Good. The medical treatment wasn’t all that advanced in this world, so the physician’s assurance gave no definite peace of mind, but judging by his tone, she wouldn’t have to worry for now.

Now that her own well-being had been confirmed, Aura could speak as a wife instead of a Queen.

“Then check on my ill husband in the inner palace next.”

Males were forbidden in the inner palace, but the medical staff was one of the few exceptions. As the Carpa Kingdom was a patriarch society, a “female physician” was unheard-of. Due to that, the physicians had to be made an exception to the ban of males or otherwise the residents of the inner palace wouldn’t be able to get any treatment when they fell sick.

“Yes. I will do everything in my might.”

The aged physician complied with a soft smile and left with the Queen’s permission.

In exchange for him, Aura’s personal secretary Fabio Debache entered the room.

“Excuse me, Your Highness. How did it turn out?”

Aura smiled a bit at the middle-aged secretary with the slender face and nodded once.

“Good, everything is alright with me. I sent Doctor Michelle on the way to examine my husband. Depending on his illness, I am thinking of using the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’, but let me hear your opinion about it.”

“Imbued Stone of Cure”. Secretary Fabio raised one eyebrow upon hearing that term, but nodded right away and stated his opinion.

“Very well. I cannot say anything definite without hearing Doctor Michelle’s diagnosis, but if Zenjirou-sama should suffer from a serious illness, there is only one course of action we can take then. Our country cannot afford to lose him at the present time.”

The “Imbued Stone of Cure” was a magical tool made in the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, located in the central area of the southern continent.

The royal lineage of Sharrow had their “bestowal magic” while the pope lineage of Jilbell had “healing magic”. The “Imbued Stone of Cure” could be considered the fruit of joining together their two magic techniques, and had a tremendous effect.

Of course, it couldn’t re-grow a limp you had been bereaved of or recover any of the five senses you may have lost, but only a handful of sick people ever passed away after using the “Imbued Stone of Cure”.

In this world, where the medical treatment was only on the level of the medieval Arab world, it was an “omnipotent medicine” that even surpassed the latest medical science of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, only ten or so people in this world could produce it, so it went without saying that each “Imbued Stone of Cure” had a price that could bankrupt a small country.

The Carpa Kingdom was an eminent and large kingdom that dominated the western part of the southern continent and was on fairly good terms with the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, but even so, they only possessed three “Imbued Stones of Cure” at present.

The price was ridiculous high for one, but the item was so valuable that there was no guarantee that you could purchase one, even if you readied all that money. That was the “Imbued Stone of Cure”.

“I see. It makes it easier for me to hear that.”

Aura’s expression revealed a peace of mind on Secretary Fabio’s answer.

Aura herself had immediately considered to use the “Imbued Stone of Cure” in the moment she heard that Zenjirou had fallen ill, but she found herself unable to tell if that judgment had been done by her emotions as a wife or by her reasoning as a Queen.

With a calm mind, any noble would be able to tell that Zenjirou’s death would be a fatal blow to the country when Aura still hadn’t give birth to a child.

In other words, Aura was agitated so much that she couldn’t make such an “obvious decision” anymore.

It was alright to use the “Imbued Stone of Cure” when the necessity arose. Aura regained her usual composure thanks to that conclusion and rested her right elbow on the armrest of her chair with her chin on its hand.

“At any rate, my husband still looked fine this morning when I woke up. I wonder what kind of illness got him.”

“Judging by the fact that you were not infected although you are sharing the bed with him, I believe it is quite likely that it is the kind of illness you only catch once, one you already caught it in the past.”

Aura mused about Secretary Fabio’s word with her chin still on her hand.

An illness you didn’t catch again after suffering from it once.

Aura, too, have had a few illnesses like that in the past.

“One day I caught an illness you suffer only once from in your life. I had been all well in the morning, but just before noon, I got sick… Maybe he caught that?”

The condition of “suddenly taking a turn for the worse, even though everything was fine in the morning” added to Secretary Fabio’s idea, narrowed the illnesses Aura could think of down to one.

As Secretary Fabio was more composed than Aura, he must have concluded the name of the illness long ago.

“Just as you assume, I dare to say.”

The secretary answered with a monotone voice and an inexpressive look as always.

“…..”

Aura felt the power drain from her body upon hearing his words.

If Zenjirou’s illness was really “that one”, all her worries so far would come to nothing. “That one” wasn’t a lethal illness. If anything, it was actually a good thing that he caught “that one”.

Aura’s assumption was then backed up by the words of Doctor Michelle when he returned from the inner palace before long.

“Zenjirou-sama has caught the ‘Blessing of the Forest’.”

The name of an illness with a mortality rate close to zero left the physician’s mouth. Hearing it, Aura refrained from looking up to the ceiling from the overwhelming exhaustion and told Doctor Michelle “Good, well done” with an austere expression.

In the back, Secretary Fabio showed a sly smile with one corner of his mouth raised as he easily saw through the consternation of the Queen.

* * *

“Aura, what’s the ‘Blessing of the Forest’?”

Aura had ended her duties in the palace earlier to visit her husband, who was down with a fever, and went to the inner palace. There Zenjirou still laid dead tired on the big bed and asked with a weak voice, only directing his eyes at her.

It was still evening, but since the window shutters were closed as not to let the open air in, there was no way to tell the situation outside.

Only one LED floor lamp was spending light as to make it more comfortable for Zenjirou to sleep. And even that was dimmed by a thick cloth over the lampshade.

Amidst this dim room, Aura sat in the chair that stood besides the bed and intently wiped the sweat from Zenjirou's forehead or neck with the towel she had brought over from the refrigerator while answering his question.

"Simply put, it is a local disease that has spread here since forever. It is hardly virulent and rarely anyone dies from it unless maybe an infant or old person.

Moreover, you never catch it again after having it once and strangely enough, a lot of people, who had it, show weaker symptoms on other illnesses later on, so it is called the 'Blessing of the Forest'."

Zenjirou somehow comprehended Aura's words even though his head was spinning from the fever, and unconsciously spoke out his impression.

"Uwah… If I were to bring my body, infected with the virus and full of antibodies, back to Earth, I would get a Nobel prize…?"

Even on Earth, there were illnesses like measles or chicken pox, which you generally didn't catch again after having it once, but it was truly fantasy-like that antibodies, which dramatically worked against other illnesses, too, were created as a result.

That aside, it were truly great news that this illness was "rarely lethal". Zenjirou had been crippled by the fear over an illness in the different world, but now he forgot the pain in the joints of his body for a moment and smiled faintly.

"I see. So I'll get better with just some sleep. …About how long will it take?"

"Hmm, three days at the earliest and seven days at the latest."

In short, it would take him about five days to recover. He could get up if he really wanted to, but it sure was kind of tedious to have this physical condition last for five days.

As the joints in his body were aching, it was uncomfortable even when he was laying down and due to the high fever, he was sweating non-stop, yet when he was drinking water, his throat smarted as it was swollen.

He would feel better after some sleep, but he wasn't the least bit sleepy due to the discomfort and pain in his joints. The symptoms resembled a bad cold.

(Still, you're gonna feel like shit for a week at worst, but does really 'no one die from it'? Seeing their level of civilisation, I would think they drop like flies)

Zenjirou's feverish brain suddenly came up with this doubt.

Surviving a few days in bed with a fever of over thirty-eight degrees was feasible for an average household in modern Japan, since it had doctors, medicine and a balanced nutrition.

For example, Zenjirou considered his current condition life-threatening enough for the lower class with poor nutrition.

And he wasn't wrong about that.

The reason this illness was nonchalantly called "Blessing of the Forest" was that the symptoms were far weaker when you caught it while still young. The body temperature would raise to about thirty-seven degrees at the most.

For that reason, parents with young children deliberately got them infected with the "blessing" when someone caught the "Blessing of the Forest" in town.

Of course, some boys and girls lost against the “Blessing of the Forest” and died, but one had no choice but to accept that. If the child couldn’t even overcome the “Blessing of the Forest”, it wouldn’t reach adulthood anyway. The parents deceived their own hearts by telling themselves that.

Anyway, these circumstances of the lower class had hardly any relation to Zenjirou.

“Reminds me, the waiting maids were being troubled. Would you at least allow them entry until you have recovered? That would ease my mind as well.”

Aura phrased a question she had suddenly recalled, whereat Zenjirou turned on top of the bed and showed an unpleasant expression on a rare occasion.

“Aw, if possible, I would rather not have that. To be honest, I don’t feel like getting better when people scurry around me…”

On the other hand, Aura, too, showed a bewildered expression on a rare occasion and persuaded her wilful husband.

“However, in your condition you cannot even eat or relieve yourself on your own. You need someone nursing you.”

Right now, Aura had specially taken some time off to attend to him like this, but as the Queen, she was originally in no position to do work like this. Looking after royalty was the job of the attendants, not the family.

“Uh, well…”

As his throat hurt considerable, he could only reply with a feeble voice, but he rather stubbornly refused to accept Aura’s suggestion.

“Zenjirou…?”

Aura called out to him again, so he strained his aching throat and confessed by squeezing out a small voice.

“You know, I’ve rather frayed nerves when sick. With a bit of carelessness, I start venting my displeasure on others or getting wilful.

I don’t want to do that… so I prefer to be alone…”

It wasn’t all that uncommon that a person got a sensibility different from usual when sick in bed.

Their body was weakened by the illness and it affected their mentality, too. So a lot of people got abnormally timid or felt lonely for no reason.

In Zenjirou’s case, it manifested as aggression.

The soup was too hot, the towel for wiping his body was lukewarm and so on. He started to curse every little thing. To begin with, the fact itself that others were healthy, even though he was going through such a hard time, was hateful.

As a child, he had always caused his parents trouble when he caught a fever.

Needless to say, Zenjirou was now a grown-up man at a good age. Even when he was weakened in mind and body, his mentality wasn’t so weak that he would propagate an absurd aggression to his usual milieu. He didn’t propagate it, but it was tiring to suppress that urge.

So it was better to be alone, even if it was a bit inconvenient. He didn’t even want Aura to be by his side right now. Or rather, he didn’t want her of all people to be here right now. If he were to act like a selfish kid in front of his good wife… it would take him a long time to recover on an emotional level after recovering from his illness.

“It’s okay… I can change my clothes by myself and I’ll ring the bell for the toilet…”

“Mm, but…”

Zenjirou rejected it outright with a feeble voice, whereat Aura raised a voice, still not convinced.

She considered it part of the job of a waiting maid or butler to be yelled at unreasonably by their master. However, Aura had gotten a good grasp on Zenjirou’s values in the past few months.

The man called Zenjirou considered it a sacrilege to cause others unreasonable trouble. Moreover, the status of the other party didn't matter in doing so. That applied to royalty and nobility, of course, but likewise to the waiting maids, who were nothing more than mere attendants.

Considering these values of him, she could easily predict that he would be in anguish later on if he ended up venting his displeasure on the waiting maids.

"…Fine. I will tell them to keep coming here to a minimum."

After a moment of musing, Aura gave in.

"Mm… Thanks."

Then Aura spoke out her next words kind of unconscious.

"It is nearly time for dinner. Is there anything you would like to eat?"

A nonchalant question. She surely only said it out of kindness.

The weakened Zenjirou reflexively revealed his wish upon her words.

"Porridge… I want porridge with either dried plums or an egg and soy sauce."

Porridge for the sick.

It was an all too natural association for a Japanese. However, the typical Japanese food for sick people was nothing but an unknown dish in this world.

"Porritch? What is that? Dryte plums? I know of eggs, but what is soi sauce?"

Aura tilted her head in puzzlement. Even with his thoughts dulled by the fever, Zenjirou could easily catch her reaction. His words just now didn't get through to her at all. Judging by the fact that the automatic translation of the soul of words didn't work either, there must be no equivalent for "dried plums" and "soy sauce" in their language.

He replied to Aura with a faint smile.

"Mm, I don't have the energy to explain it now… Later then, okay. And anything's fine. I'll eat everything."

Zenjirou remembered that the homemade dried plums of his aunt were in the refrigerator, but dried plums alone wouldn't make a difference. The Carpa Kingdom did cultivate wheat, but there was apparently no custom of turning it into porridge. Even if he had them prepare a special wheat porridge for him and added dried plums to it, there was no guarantee it would taste good.

He ought to save the development of new dishes for when he had a bit more energy.

(Guess I'll deal with it a bit more serious when I feel better…)

While such thoughts crossed his mind, Aura stood up from the chair with a smooth movement and said.

"…Okay. I will tell the kitchen to prepare you a special meal."

"Mm, can't wait…"

Aura wiped the sweat from his forehead with a towel once more before leaving the room, whereat Zenjirou responded like that with a weak and forced smile.

When Aura left and closed the door behind her with a clatter, Zenjirou was all alone in the dim bedroom.

"Uhh…"

He fumbled his way to the table next to the bed with his hand, took the 500ml PET bottle, which was filled with boiled water that had cooled down, from it, opened the lid and raised it to his mouth.

"Guh…"

His throat stung just from swallowing the lukewarm water. Still, he knew how dangerous it was when he didn't take in some water after his body sweated so much, so he endured the pain and drank the water.

"Fuh…"

After emptying the bottle halfway through, Zenjirou close it again and put it back onto the bed table.

This PET bottle stemmed from the mineral water he had packed into his backpack along with the survival tools and emergency provision for his second summoning.

Back in Japan it would just be recyclable garbage, but in this world, the small container, too, was a valuable item.

It was light, didn't break when dropped and didn't spill anything when closed. An extremely convenient utensil. Zenjirou would've a lot more trouble drinking water without it.

A repetitive use invoked a hygienic uncertainty, even if washed carefully, so it couldn't be utilized for long, but it was pure gold in an emergency like this.

Zenjirou had refreshed his dry throat in exchange for a stinging pain, then he plunged his face into his pillow and writhed while aware that he sweated all over his body.

(Aww, what came over me!? Wanting porridge in a different world… Am I an snotty brat or what!?)

Thankfully Aura was an understanding person, who could read the mood. If she had stayed, he might have demanded "canned peaches" next.

Zenjirou didn't evaluate himself all too highly to begin with, but he had never thought that he would lack so much self-control as to reveal such a stupid selfishness. His self-loathing reached a fatal level, in all seriousness.

(Aw, damn. I've to get better quickly or my mind will break…)

Still plunged into his pillow, he kept regretting his verbal slip in anguish.

However, that, too, was a blessing in disguise. After a while of engulfing himself in a self-loathing so strong that he forgot the drowsiness of the fever and even the pain in his joints, Zenjirou let his consciousness sink into the abyss of sleep without him knowing about it.

"…Good grief. Have I really been paying attention to my husband until now?"

Around the same time in the living room of the inner palace, Aura, too, engulfed herself in a self-loathing that was in no way inferior to Zenjirou's, after leaving the bedroom, then reflected on herself.

Aura sat down in the couch of the living room with a thump, showing unsightly wrinkles around her nose.

"…Hah."

As a bit of her irritation had subdued from sitting down, Aura cast her eyes down with a calm expression now and grumbled.

"Porritch, dryte plums and soi sauce, was it? Since the soul of words is not working, letting someone look for it will… already be impossible, I bet."

Her sick husband had automatically voiced his desired food and she couldn't even prepare that for him. Not just that, she didn't even know his preferences in food, so her self-loathing became even worse.

"An unknown land, unfamiliar clothes and obscure food…"

Aura imagined Zenjirou's situation anew and felt gloomy.

In the previous war, she herself had commanded the expeditionary troops for a long time far away from the Carpa Kingdom, so she could empathize with how bad it was for the mind and body to be unable to eat the accustomed food for a long time.

That tendency became quite apparent in wounded soldiers with a weakened spirit. Any military officer knew that the second most frequent last words from a dying soldier in the expeditionary troops were about their "hometown food", only exceeded by their "family".

"…In the end, I am nothing but compelling inconveniences on him."

A dejected voice unconsciously left Aura's mouth when her reflecting ended.

She knew that wasn't the case.

Aura had no recollections of forcing him into coming to this world and in fact, Zenjirou had made the decision to come here all by himself.

When she thought back on it with a calmer mind, she couldn't recall that Zenjirou had ever showed any signs of regretting his own choice or lamenting about any inconveniences as he lived in the inner palace.

As far as Aura was aware, he was always having fun. Especially during the nights, where they had physical contact, he was making a happy face that was overflowing with euphoria and satisfaction. She could claim at least that much with confidence.

To shake off her melancholy, Aura stretched herself on the couch.

"Right. My husband is by no means unhappy. I am just a tad too negative. Still…"

She then mused once more about her actions so far from a different rational point of view than before.

"Still, I believe it is alright to grant my husband's request to a reasonable extent. It would be a problem if he were to ask to be send back to his world because of homesickness, since it would not only throw the royal family into disarray, but also the whole Kingdom."

Aura neatly combined her emotions as a wife with the sense of duty as a Queen, and told herself that.

* * *

The South Continent knew of an animal called "Small Flying Dragon".

Like its name implied, it was a rather small dragon amongst the winged dragons (the kind of dragon that flies through the sky), and was as big as a crow at most. From the four kind of dragons that human succeeded in turning into livestock, it was the only winged type.

Incidentally, the other three kinds were the "raptorial dragon", the "Hulking Dragon" and the "Meat Dragon". All of them were important and indispensable livestock, each sustaining the human lifestyle.

To be more specific, the "Raptorial Dragon" was used in battle and as a means of transport. The "Hulking Dragon" was used for labour and the "Meat Dragon" had the role to provide meat for consumption.

In terms of the livestock on Earth, the "Raptorial Dragon" equalled a "horse", the "Hulking Dragon" a "cattle" and the "Meat Dragon" a "pig".

Then, what was the "Small Flying Dragon" good for? It was a "means of communication".

Basically, it fulfilled the same role as "carrier pigeons" on Earth in old times.

Compared to the general means of communication, namely a messenger delivering a letter directly on a "Raptorial Dragon", it lacked reliability since there was a high possibility that the letter wasn't delivered due to some unforeseen accident, but its speed was overwhelming.

The "Small Flying Dragon" didn't even take half a day for a distance for which a couple of mounted messengers needed five days without rest in a relay team.

Such a "Small Flying Dragon" arrived from the eastern border station at the palace with a letter at noon that day.

"A message from the eastern border, you say?"

In the afternoon of the same day, Aura was working on her duties in her office when she received the news from Secretary Fabio and tilted her head puzzled.

"Yes. A 'Small Flying Dragon' from the border station in the east just arrived with this letter."

Saying so, the middle-aged secretary with a slender face put three wooden cylinder, each the size of the little finger, onto the table.

The letters inside were most likely all the same. The "Small Flying Dragon" was in danger of getting lost or being preyed on by a larger flying dragon, so it was customary that various of them were entrusted with delivering the same message.

Aura took one of them and opened it, retrieving the thin dragon-skin parchment from within. The commander of the border station went out of his way to send precious “Small Flying Dragons”, so something relatively urgent must have happened.

After she read through the parchment with a bad feeling, Aura made a small sigh.

“Your Highness?”

“…..”

On her secretary’s call, Aura wordlessly held out the small dragon-skin parchment to him. It was typical that the information was hardly confidential, even if it was urgent, because a “Small Flying Dragon” could be intercepted by the enemy despite its overwhelming speed.

So it wasn’t all that strange that Secretary Fabio, a retainer of Aura, was allowed to read it.

“Excuse me.”

Taking the dragon-skin parchment, Secretary Fabio read the small scrap and let the corner of his mouth twitch.

“Earlier this morning, Her Highness Princess Isabelle from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell has arrived at the eastern fort together with her personal guards of three-hundred men. She requested entry into the country, so according to the treaty, I allowed it under the condition of disarming in the urban areas. Furthermore, three-hundred of the cavalry from the fort will accompany Her Highness Isabelle as guards, too.”

After that text followed the date on which the letter had been written and the sign of the commander in charge of the eastern fort.

While Secretary Fabio read the first parchment, Aura confirmed the contents of the remaining two wooden cylinders just in case and as expected, they contained the exact same message as the first.

Secretary Fabio read the short letter a few times as not to miss anything and then spoke with a flat voice.

“A visit by Her Highness Isabelle, mhm. Does it mean that amongst the royalty or nobility in the bordering countries, someone is so sick that he requires the power of Her Highness itself?”

“Yeah, I would say so. A lot of money must have flown for Princess Isabelle herself to make an appearance.”

Aura gave her consent to the words of the secretary, which had been phrased as a question.

Isabelle Jilbell.

Just like her name revealed, she was the Princess of the pope lineage of Jilbell, one of the two royal families in the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell located in the central area of the South Continent.

As the current pope, older than sixty years, was her father, she herself also had passed her 40s, even if she was called a princess. She was already a mother of three children, but it should be emphasized that she was one of the handful of people amongst the royalty that could use “healing magic”.

A lot of people visited the Twin Kingdom to receive the grace of the “healing magic” from the pope lineage of Jilbell. However, it went without saying that hardly anyone, who was at the point of death from an injury or illness, could make his way from his homeland to the capital of the Twin Kingdom.

Then what was a person, who was so sick that he couldn’t leave his sickbed, supposed to do? It was quite plain. He summoned someone from the pope lineage. With the kind of sum that would make a minister of finance go pale in the face.

“Three-hundred as an escort, huh. Judging by that small number, they must carry quite the number of ‘magic tools’.”

“Yes, without doubt. I do not know which country is involved, but they genuinely seem to be on the watch.”

“Investigate it at once. In some cases, a coup might occur in a bordering country.”

“Very well.”

When someone from the Jilbell lineage headed to a patient in a different country, an abnormal number of guards usually accompanied that person.

The number went up or down a bit depending on the distance to the destination and friendly relationships with that country, but approximately a thousand elite knights were considered to be the minimum. The reason why people from the pope lineage took a number of guards, which appeared excessive on a glance, with them, could be understood right away with a bit of thinking.

The people from the pope lineage were the only ones in the world, who could use “healing magic”. It was more than obvious that royalty or nobility “wouldn’t want to let go” of the existence that had saved them from the clutches of death.

In fact, there had been various cases in the past, where a visiting person of the pope lineage had been confined, announcing that “he (or she) wished to migrate to said country”.

Having learned from that past, the Jilbell family now had made it an absolute condition that an usually armed escort was always allowed to accompany the person from the Jilbell pope lineage into the country when they travelled to a different country. That escort was strong enough to deal no insufficient damage to the visiting country if they should make any shady moves.

(Needless to say, the country in question had to shoulder the travel/lodging expenses for these guards.)

However, the bigger the troops, the slower they moved. In some cases, sick people, who could originally been saved, died because the delegation of around a thousand people took too long.

The trump card dispatched for such cases was the knights with “magic tools” that Aura had mentioned just now.

These knights matched a thousand people as they were armed with “magic tool” that were created by the other royal family in the Twin Kingdom: the Sharrow lineage. It was possible to cut back on the number of escorts a lot by dispatching them and as a result, the troops moved faster.

In other words, you could conclude from the small number of escorts that the patient was in such a critical condition.

“Either way, the treatment must already be over and they are on their way home, seeing as they are heading our way. Shall I arrange your schedule, so that you have time to use the ‘Space-Time Magic’?”

“Yes, do that.”

The secretary bowed down a bit to the sighing words of the Queen.

The reason why Princess Isabelle visited the Carpa Kingdom was obvious. She must have wanted Aura to send her back to the capital of the Twin Kingdom with the “teleportation” magic.

The movement through “teleportation” ignored any detours, thus saved time and stilled the fears of a travel.

The “teleportation” magic was a large magic that required a great amount of magical power and a long chant, so it couldn’t be used all that easily, but Aura could hardly refuse a request from the Princess of the pope lineage of Jilbell.

It was a good occasion to have a master of the “healing magic” owe her one. If anything, Aura would gladly welcome her as a guest under normal circumstances.

“The problem is my husband.”

After she said that, she placed one hand against her chin and became absorbed in thought.

Zenjirou had caught the “Blessing of the Forest” yesterday and currently was the very picture of a sick person.

“Considering the distance to the eastern fort, I guess Princess Isabelle will arrive here in five days?”

“Yes, more or less. Zenjirou-sama might not have recovered from the ‘Blessing of the Forest’ by then if it drags on.”

Recovering from the symptoms of the “Blessing of the Forest” took at least three days and seven at worst. As Zenjirou’s symptoms were more serious, it was quite likely that he would still be bed-stricken when Princess Isabelle arrived.

Aura contorted her face a bit.

“…How troublesome. I am not all that keen to let a foreign person into the room of my husband. I guess we should prepare an extra bedroom for the worst case and have my husband stay there during Princess Isabelle’s visit.”

The room Zenjirou normally lived in was filled with the electronic appliances he had brought along. If possible, she didn’t want to spread its information, even if she didn’t think that anyone could do anything with it right away after knowing about it.

The simplest solution to this was to have Zenjirou live in a different room for a little while. The inner palace was originally built to house several women, but at present, Zenjirou was the only one living there, so there were enough empty rooms.

“That would be playing it safe. After all, we can hardly afford to refuse Her Highness Isabelle to pay him a sick visit.”

Secretary Fabio expressed a genuine consent to Aura’s suggestion.

The “Blessing of the Forest” was certainly not lethal and it strengthened your body against other illnesses, so it was wiser not to cure it with “healing magic”.

However, there were plain spells like “stamina recovery” or “mental calming” amongst the “healing magic” that eased the patient’s pain without curing the illness itself.

There was no reason to refuse Princess Isabelle if she were to express the desire to pay him a sick visit.

“If it comes to that, my husband will have to meet with Princess Isabelle in his feverish condition.”

Zenjirou became a bit snappy when sick, just like he had said himself. Usually his reasoning and self-control were working admirable well, but for the moment, they tended to break down a bit.

Princess Isabelle might look like a somewhat clean-limbed and refined lady in her middle years, but at heart, she was a “healer” with nearly thirty years of experience and a trueborn member of the Jilbell royal lineage.

She was big-hearted enough to forgive the rude attitude of a sick person, but likewise, she was formidable enough to try to squeeze out any information from that attitude.

“I just hope that no trouble arises…”

Aura herself was kind of aware that the possibility of actually nothing happening was rather low while she mumbled that.

* * *

Six days later.

Aura had showed Princess Isabelle in her private chamber in the palace and made some private conversation in form of a pleasant talk with her.

The delegation of Princess Isabelle had arrived at the Royal Carpa Palace yesterday evening. The official greeting had been dealt with in the audience room this morning, but they couldn’t talk freely to each other at a public location.

Thus, the first words of Princess Isabelle had been like this:

“It has been a while, Your Highness Aura. First of all, let me congratulate you on your marriage.”

The middle-aged woman with a bit of plumpness said so while sitting on the leather couch, then lowered her head a bit in a refined gesture.

In the audience room, the two women had been clad in tight formal attires, but now they had changed into dresses with few ornaments.

Aura wore a dark red long-dress without sleeves while Isabelle had chosen a white dress with half sleeves that was relatively loose.

In the Carpa Kingdom, wearing a white dress was a special privilege for young ladies or brides, so ladies at a certain age refrained from wearing one, but in the Twin Kingdom, the white colour represented the Jilbell royal lineage, so the people from the pope lineage wore clothes based around the colour white under normal circumstances.

The design of her dress, just like the colour, was quite different from the fashion of the Carpa Kingdom as well. A long-dress with slits or a long wrap skirt were typical in the Carpa Kingdom, but Isabelle's dress had a miniscule opening around the chest and concluded in a flared skirt.

Quite the contrast to a Carpa Kingdom dress, which was so revealing around the neck that the cleavage could be seen.

"Yes, thank you. The ceremony took place without problems. I am grateful about the generous wedding gift from the Twin Kingdom."

Aura answered like that without lowering head, throwing out her chest instead. Age-wise, Princess Isabelle was more than ten years older than her, but Aura's status as the head of the country made her the overwhelming social superior. Princess Isabelle was nothing more than one of the countless royalty.

She smiled elegantly by putting one hand in front of her mouth a bit.

This gesture made her appear more as a madam from a mercantile house than a member of a royal family.

"I am glad that it was to your liking, Your Highness. Originally, etiquette dictates that I myself should have participated in the celebration, but an urgent matter had occupied me… I will definitely make it up to you at a later point."

"I take it that I cannot make you tell me about that 'urgent matter' as a way of compensation?"

Princess Isabelle showed not the slightest agitation towards Aura's slightly provocative words and hedged it.

"Yes. It involved my credibility as a 'healer', so even if it is a request by Your Highness, I ask for your pardon on this matter."

She used a meek smile and meek tone to make a firm refusal.

Well, obviously.

Who suffered which illness at what point.

Royalty or nobility of other countries would surely not ask the Jilbell lineage for treatment, if such information was spread flippantly. After all, there was no royalty or nobility that didn't love to behave secretively.

The Jilbell lineage possessed a morale that was close to the "medical confidentiality", to vaguely put it in the words of modern society.

Aura had known from the beginning that there was no way that Isabelle would agree and abandoned the topic at once.

"I see, too bad. That reminds me, there is something I would like you to take a look at, Princess."

Aura then said with an expression as if she had suddenly thought of it and rang the bell on the table.

The door opened at once and Secretary Fabio appeared as he had probably stood outside the whole time to await orders.

"You called?"

"Yes. Bring me the 'rings' of my husband and I, as well as the 'certain items'."

"Yes, very well."

"Rings?"

Princess Isabelle tilted her head puzzled, whereat Aura smiled meaningful.

“Indeed. The country of my husband apparently has a custom, where the man presents the woman a pair ring. On this occasion, I would like to make these rings into some kind of ‘magic tool’.”

“Oh my, how wonderful. In that case, I will personally attend to the matter. When I forward your request to the Sharrow Family, I will put in a good word for you.”

“Please do.”

While they were having such a conversation, the door was knocked and Secretary Fabio returned with a silver tray in his right hand.

“Excuse me. I have brought them.”

“Thanks. Put them there.”

“Yes.”

Secretary Fabio put the silver tray onto the table between Aura and Isabelle and retreated after a bow.

The tray had two rings and two pouches on it.

Princess Isabelle made a slightly dubious look when she saw the pouches, but her eyes obviously widened in surprise in the next moment when she let her gaze wander to the rings.

“This…!”

“You may take them in hand. Let me hear your honest opinion.”

Aura prompted her with a broad grin, whereupon Isabelle took one of the rings and held it up against the sunlight coming in from the window.

The diamonds and gold on the ring from the different world sparkled in the sunlight.

The wedding ring that Zenjirou had given Aura was a wide ring with diamonds embedded into it.

Three small colourless and brilliant diamonds were embedded next to each other into a yellow-golden socket.

At first, Zenjirou had considered to choose pink diamonds to match Aura’s eyes and hair according to the recommendation of the jeweller clerk, but vibrant pink diamonds were shockingly expensive. He could have afforded some other types with a reddish tint with his budget, but instead of compromising on the colour, he had chosen the standard colourless diamonds in the end.

“How beautiful… Are these gems crystals?”

“No, they are diamonds.”

“Diamonds!? In such a shape?”

Unbecoming for a lady, Princess Isabelle raised a surprised voice. But it was understandable.

The gem called diamond existed in this world, too, but there were no common techniques to polish them. All the diamonds currently in existence had been cut with magic by an ancient earth archmage.

Even if the archmage from olden times were to be resurrected into the present time, it would be impossible for him to cut it into a polyhedron that emitted the most vibrant and beautiful radiance according to calculations of incident and reflective light.

The cutting techniques for gems advanced along with the development of precise machines. It was absolutely impossible to reproduce it in this world, even with the help of the irregular power called magic.

The same could be said for the golden socket.

“I wonder how these well-matched lines were carved so detailed…”

The fashionable wedding ring had simple, but systematic lines like the shading in a manga, engraved on the surface. Princess Isabelle’s home country, the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell was the leading power on the continent in regards to gems, but despite that, no one there would be able to reproduce something like this.

The jeweller crafts of this world were in no way inferior in a broad artistic sense, rather, the reproduction was impossible due to the simple problem of technology.

It was the same as telling the world's best calligrapher to write tidier characters than on a computer.

Aura inwardly made a sigh of relief as Princess Isabelle's reaction told her that her conjecture hadn't been wrong.

(I knew it. It fascinates someone with an eye for it)

When Aura had looked at the ring Zenjirou gave her in their wedding night again under the morning sun the next day, she also had exclaimed a surprise not much different from Princess Isabelle's just now.

The workmanship was just too detailed. The three gems emitted a bright radiance from every angle.

Aura explained herself at once to Zenjirou when he woke up and smile at her happily, and convinced him not to wear the rings ordinarily.

Its radiance was just too bright. If Aura were to wear this ring, the vigilant nobles would notice it right away and question her about the origins of the ring.

This development would have undoubtedly drawn attention to the donor of the ring, namely Zenjirou. Back then, the unwanted attention might have then preponed his debut into higher society.

At that time, Aura had wondered if she was overthinking it, but her worry seemed to have been spot-on, judging by Princess Isabelle's reaction.

Before long, Princess Isabelle noticed that Aura was looking at her with a smile, so she laughed it off with an affected "Ohoho" and put the ring back onto the tray.

"Oh… I beg your pardon, Your Highness. I was so fascinated by it."

"Quite alright. An impressive sight, is it not? If possible, I would like to turn it into a 'magic tool'."

"Yes, I believe the Sharrow Family will put in their utmost effort for such an exquisite item."

Jewellery was a typical object for a magic tool, only second to weapons. Due to that, the people of the Sharrow lineage, employing the "Bestowal Magic", inevitable had a good eye for jewellery.

It was almost a given that the other members would be even more surprised than Princess Isabelle.

"Good. I have not decided on a magic for it yet. Perhaps you have any ideas?"

As Aura asked for a suggestion, Princess Isabelle put her hand against her full chin and mused for a while. Then,

"Hmm, it may be exquisite, but is a tiny jewellery after all, so I believe it would be better to refrain from putting in a large magic. Maybe something rudimental like 'Ignition', 'Fireproof' or 'Spring of Water'?"

she replied with a sensible remark.

"I will not be so unreasonable as to ask for 'cure', but maybe 'stamina recovery'?"

"It is possible as long as you are alright with the fact that the ring turns into ash after around five uses."

"Uh…"

The women then continued to discuss it for a while longer, but couldn't really come up with a fitting magic. Isabelle was going to stay in the Carpa Palace for a while longer anyway, so there was no need to find an answer right now.

As they concluded the matter for now and she had put the ring back onto the tray, Princess Isabelle suddenly looked at the two pouches on the tray.

"Come to think of it, what is inside these pouches, Your Highness?"

Aura picked up the bigger of the two pouches and replied with a delightful smile to Isabelle's question.

"Right, these belong to my husband as well. I would like to hear your professional opinion on this occasion, so I had them brought here. You are an expert on jewellery, correct?"

"Well, I belong to the royal family of the Twin Kingdom after all, so I am more knowledgeable about them than the average, but I rank behind the people of the Sharrow lineage."

While Isabelle said that, she also shot a curious glance at the pouch in Aura's hand.

Judging by Aura's words, the pouch must contain some kind of jewellery. Moreover, it belonged to the same person, who brought these extravagant rings into this world.

Her anticipation rose all the more.

Aura opened the pouch while feeling Isabelle's glance on her fingers, put her fingers into it and took out one piece. With a CLACK, she put the "certain object", held between her middle finger and thumb, onto the tray.

It was a marble.

The traditional marble had the simplest design of stained glass encased by a transparent, colourless glass sphere and rolled about on the silver tray.

"!?"

As Princess Isabelle witnessed its radiance, she widened her eyes even more than when she had taken the ring in hand.

Assuming her surprise at the ring had been "revealed intentionally", then the surprise she was showing right now ought to be one that "she failed to conceal".

Princess Isabelle showed an expression that said "Oops" for a moment, then assumed her usual calm expression again.

"…Pardon me. That took me entirely by surprise. What exactly would that be?"

Keeping her eyes on the rolling marble on the silver tray, she spoke with an extremely surprised tone.

The "surprise" this time was affected and not an impulsive feeling like the initial surprise when she caught sight of the marble.

Aura was dubious of Isabelle's exaggerated reaction, but hid it behind a smile and replied.

"Astonishing, is it not? It belongs to my husband as well. It is neither crystal, much less a diamond. They call it glass. I was told that it is far more fragile than crystals and thus breaks easily."

Princess Isabelle was reaching out for the marble mindfully, but on the word "fragile", she stopped her hand with a flinch.

Aura smiled to herself a bit, then

"Although I say fragile, I mean that it breaks when you drop it from a height onto a solid surface. It will not be damaged when you hold it normally and we have a carpet on the floor here, so even when you should drop it, it will not cause it to break."

she added that.

"In that case, may I hold it in hand then?"

"Yes, take a good look."

With Aura's permission, Princess Isabelle picked up the marble with three fingers and held it up against the light like with the ring before, leaking a soft sigh of admiration.

"Wonderful…"

"Let me be frank with you, Princess Isabelle. What price would you attach to a single piece of it if it were kept for sale?"

Aura made a surprisingly frank question with some kind of intention, whereat Isabelle faced forward again and replied after clearing her throat once with an affected cough.

"That is to say, you intend to sell these gems, Your Highness?"

Isabelle looked rather serious, whereupon Aura smiled at her a bit.

"Not quite. They originally belong to my husband after all. I cannot sell them all on my own accord. However, as this article does not exist natively in our world, I am allowed to part with a few of them to measure their value."

Then she said with a shake of her head.

“Why certainly.”

Isabelle nodded apparently convinced by Aura’s explanation.

Non-essential things without a value for the military such as jewellery, had no set value, even if it would seem that way. Much less an item like a glass marble, which was unknown to this world up till now.

Although Aura and Zenjirou may consider them as “valuable” from a subjective side, the true value could only be measured through a general assessment from the public.

As such, it wasn’t all that odd that Aura hit upon the idea of spreading one or two to the public to establish its value. Likewise, it was neither a poor choice to ask Princess Isabelle for her opinion on it.

However, Princess Isabelle said something with a serious expression that made Aura doubt her ears.

“Hmm, supposing I would be able to buy this gem… I would offer thirty gold coins for it.”

Thirty cold coins.

Aura was at a loss for words from the unexpected amount offered, but somehow managed not to show it on her face and replied shortly.

“…Are you being serious?”

“…..”

“…..”

After a short silence, Princess Isabelle shrugged her shoulders resignedly and answered.

“…Very well. Fifty gold coins then. I do not believe that anyone would offer any more than this.”

She spoke as if she was having a business discussion here all of a sudden instead of a hypothetical one, and proposed an addition of whole twenty gold coins at once.

Aura made no bones about her surprise this time.

She had checked with her, asking “are you being serious?”, because she already considered thirty gold coins “exorbitant”, so she never expected the offer to raise even further instead.

Maybe she misunderstood Aura’s words as “you seriously want to buy it at such a cheap price?”?

With that in mind, Aura gave Princess Isabelle a probing glance, but Princess Isabelle was looking at her with a gentle smile on her plump, but graceful face.

Aura was convinced by seeing that smile.

(No, that is not it. I find it hard to believe that Princess Isabelle would misread such an obvious implied doubt. She raised it deliberately, huh. But why would she put such an exorbitant price on a single gem?)

The sum of fifty gold coins was off the wall.

To make it easier to understand: You could buy the cheapest “Raptorial Dragon” for three gold coins and for ten gold coins you even got a superb “Raptorial Dragon for knights” that was trained for combat.

Moreover, the residence of a lower class noble without an own landholding went for a price of fifty to hundred gold coins. So it should be obvious how extraordinary the price of fifty gold coins for a single marble was, no matter how rare and exquisite it was.

Needless to say, such a sum wasn’t uncommon for jewellery and some goods were even traded for one more digit. However, this marble wasn’t worth that much in Aura’s opinion.

Something was strange.

Sensing that, Aura took the other pouch and put a few beads from it onto the silver tray as to attain more information.

“Well then, how about these? I find them rather intriguing as well.”

Red, blue and green. The clear and transparent beads in various colours were rather eye-catching, but Princess Isabelle’s reaction remained down-to-earth.

“Oh my, they are fantastic, too. Not only are the grains equal, there is also a small hole in the middle. That promises a diverse and interesting utilization.”

Neither her praising words, nor her fascinated look seemed to be feigned, but she didn’t show any surprise, either, when she caught sight of the beads.

“Beautiful, would you not agree? And quite intriguing. You could make a necklace if you just pull a string through the hole. What would you say is an appropriate price for these?”

“Hmm, you can tell their quality on a glance, but considering the size… I would estimate ten silver coins per grain.”

Princess Isabelle put her hand against her full chin and suggested a price, which wasn’t all that different from Aura’s expectation.

Incidentally, one gold coins was worth a hundred silver coins, albeit for a small variance in its age or region.

Fifty gold coins for one marble. In silver coins, it would be five-thousand. On the other hand, one bead was worth ten silver coins.

In other words, Princess Isabelle had estimated one marble worth five-hundred times the value of a bead.

That difference was certainly warrantable due to their variation in weight, but Aura considered the price for a marble somewhat excessive.

The abnormal value of the marble stood out all the more as the price for the beads was just as she had expected.

(Still, does such a blatant price mean that she wants to show that she has laid her cards on the table? …I shall test her for a bit)

“Oh, I see. It was most helpful. Let me grant you one piece for your troubles. Pick whichever you like.”

Saying so, Aura picked up the pouch with the marbles in an affected manner and poured the contents onto the silver tray.

A dozen marbles rolled about on the silver tray.

“Oh my!”

Princess Isabelle uttered a remark of surprise with one hand in front of her mouth, whereat Aura kept track of what she was looking at while calling out to her with a soft smile.

“No need for restraint now. You may choose whichever you like after you checked them thoroughly.”

All kind of marbles spread on the tray. From the standard type with coloured glass inside to marbles with a bleared surface to ones with a beautiful marble pattern. There was even a globe marble amongst them that had a simple world map drawn on it.

As all of them were displayed on a single tray, they looked quite impressive worth to be called “jewels”.

“…..”

“…..”

Princess Isabelle must have sensed that Aura was watching her behaviour. She shrugged her shoulders once, then picked up one marble from the tray.

“Then I will you take up on your kind offer and receive this.”

The marble she had picked was a rather transparent and colourless one without any patterns.

“As for the remaining ones…”

“Say no more. It solely depends on my husband, but if he should be willing to part with them, I will definitely speak to you first, Princess.”

“Much appreciated.”

Aura’s assurance was seemingly satisfying for Princess Isabelle as she smiled softly and politely lowered her head.

She then cast a glance at the shadow from the sunlight shining in from the window, and said as if she had suddenly thought of it.

“Oh, whatever happened to my manners? I ended up getting lost in the conversation. Your Highness, as a kind of repayment for the gem, may I have your permission to pay your sick husband a visit? I will be able to give a helping hand for a bit.”

“Of course. You are gladly welcome to do so. No one on this continent would dare to refuse a sick bed visit from someone of the Jilbell lineage. As soon as the preparations are done, I will guide you to the inner palace. Take the room next door to rest until then.”

“Very well. Excuse me then.”

Princess Isabelle concluded the conversation with a smile at the end and stood up with a genteel movement, making a small bow and leaving the room.

* * *

“…And thus, Princess Isabelle estimated the big, round gems to be worth fifty gold coins and the small grains with the hole to be worth ten silver coins. Let me hear your honest opinion.”

In exchange for Princess Isabelle, who had left for the room next door, Secretary Fabio had entered the room. Aura had filled him in on the details of the earlier conversation and now sought the opinion of her private secretary.

“Fifty gold coins, you say? I get the feeling that this price is a little bit over the top.”

The secretary said that with raised eyebrows, whereat Aura hit him with a voice that made no pretence of her disgust.

“Fabio, watch your vocabulary. Or are you seriously saying that fifty gold coins is just ‘a little bit’ excessive?”

“…My apologies. Let me correct myself. It is a price that exceeded our expectations by far.”

Without flinching from the displeased utterance by his master, Secretary Fabio apologized and rephrased it with a curt bow.

Aura herself had no intention to fuss over such a trivial expression in length either. She regained her composure right away and continued the conversation while looking up to the mask-like expression of her secretary as he stood in front of the couch.

“It is strange, would you not agree? Let alone the fact that she showed a far greater reaction to the gems than to the rings.”

The weddings rings of Aura and Zenjirou.

The meticulous processed golden socket had jewels called diamonds embedded in it, which were polished with a technique unknown to this world. The beauty of this jewellery was obvious to anyone. Even a person without any knowledge about jewellery would normally valuate the rings over the marbles.

“Certainly. Above all, it baffles me that Her Highness Isabelle has taken such an obvious attitude.”

Saying so, Secretary Fabio expressed his agreement to the opinion of his master.

If anything, Princess Isabelle was known for having a good personality, but nevertheless, she had survived the higher society as a member of the royal family from a major power for more than forty years.

The other party would take advantage of her if she were to express her desires too obvious. She ought to have internalized such common sense.

Despite that, she had dared to propose the ridiculous sum of fifty gold coins.

“I do not recall that Princess Isabelle ever had a soft spot for new things, nor that she tends to be profligately. Then the sum of fifty gold coins must be an appropriate price for her.”

“Her Highness Isabelle could possibly be anticipating a rivalry. If she happens to know of someone that would pay an equal or even greater amount once the gems get known, her enigmatic behaviour would make sense.”

“In any event, she does not consider it as mere jewellery.”

The slender-faced secretary resolutely affirmed Aura’s emphasis.

“Yes, that much is for sure. I cannot imagine anything concrete, but I would say it is safe to believe that she discerned some kind of great utility value in the gems.”

“Mhm…”

Aura crossed her arms on top of the couch and recalled Princess Isabelle’s reactions.

When Aura had scattered all of the marbles on the tray, Princess Isabelle had her eyes on the transparent and colourless marble from the very beginning. As long as that was no coincidence or an intentional misleading from her, there might be some kind of value in the colour or transparency of the marbles. However, crystals could easily be used as a replacement in that case.

“I cannot make sense of it. I know too little as to make little more than guesses. Seems I will have to ask the old geezer for his opinion later on.”

“That sounds reasonable. Espaldion-sama might know something we two are unaware of.”

The royal archmage Espaldion was the best magician in the Carpa Kingdom, but at the same time, also a wise man with a multifarious knowledge. The aged magician might know something that would provide some kind of indication.

“Indeed. Tell him that I would like to borrow his wisdom, if possible tonight already.”

“As you command.”

Secretary Fabio replied with that and politely lowered his head.

“Anyway, fifty gold coins for one, eh? If they all have the same value, my husband will be able to gain a fortune of around two-thousand and five-hundred gold coins from just that.”

You could build a small fortress with that amount.

It was a large amount of money, even for royalty.

“Yes. It would be precarious to sell the gems without exactly knowing what kind of value Her Highness Isabelle saw in them, but I would say it is alright to let Zenjirou-sama do as he wants with them, given that they cause us no harm.”

“Yeah, I would really like to secure the Twin Kingdom as a business partner. After all, they always pay with newly coined gold coins.”

“I know it might be rude of me to say this, but I would welcome it when Zenjirou-sama exchanges the gained cold coins with our large silver coins from the coffers of the state then.”

“Now you are being too frank.”

Aura unconsciously showed a wry smile towards the words of the middle-aged secretary.

At present, only two countries were minting gold coins on the southern continent. The Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell was one of them while unfortunately the Carpa Kingdom wasn’t the other one.

There were no gold veins in the territory of the Carpa Kingdom and they could only prospect small amounts of gold from rivers. The found amount wasn’t enough to allow a regular minting of gold coins every year.

Instead, they got the most and best silver mines on the South Continent, so they traded with foreign countries by means of “large silver coins”, which had a high purity and were thus worth twenty-five times the value of normal silver coins. But even so, the value of their large silver coins was only a quarter of the gold coins from the Twin Kingdom.

Due to that, it was still an unresolved matter that the most valuable currency used inside the country wasn’t their own.

So the least they could do was to amass the gold coins of the Twin Kingdom in the coffers of the state for emergencies, but the Carpa Kingdom had only just won a long war. The coffers looked rather desolate.

In the worst case, they would have to seriously consider "buying gold coins" from the Twin Kingdom with silver coins. Even two-thousand gold coins were already a rather attractive sum.

However, things wouldn't proceed without a consultation.

"Okay, we will put this matter on hold until I talked with the old geezer tonight. I cannot afford to make Princess Isabelle wait any longer. I will show her to the inner palace. I take the preparations for it are done?"

"Yes, whenever you command."

Aura nodded with "Good" upon Secretary Fabio's instant reply, then stood up from the couch.

Princess Isabelle was a privileged guest and her visit of Zenjirou on his sick bed was officially considered an "act of good will". It would be too rude to make her wait for too long.

"Then let us waste no time."

Aura knocked on the door of the room next door as to guide Princess Isabelle to the inner palace herself.

* * *

Today was the sixth day since Zenjirou had caught the "Blessing of the Forest".

He was snuggled in a bed of a room in the inner palace into which he was moved in a hurry yesterday, and sweating in his sleep.

His fever had already gone down to around thirty-seven degrees, the swelling in his throat started to abate and he had regained his appetite.

Until two days ago, he could barely slurp the soup with minced chicken and vegetables, but this morning, he managed to eat a cuisine that resembled mashed potatoes with sweet-sour *red bean jam*. For Zenjirou it had tasted like something similar to potatoes, but it had actually been a dish, where steamed bananas got mashed. It was more of a home cooking than a palace cuisine, but it was relatively easy to digest and had a high nutritional value, so it was perfect for a sick person.

According to the physician, he would completely recover within the next couple of days.

Zenjirou himself certainly felt better now, but he had grown accustomed to his true bedroom in the last few month, so he was restless about sleeping all alone on a brand-new bed in a different room without his electrical appliances.

His tired body demanded sleep nevertheless as it fought against the illness. Although his condition had improved, Zenjirou was dozing off at temperatures of over thirty degrees during the day. His drowsy consciousness was aroused from sleep by the soft sensation of a palm on his forehead and an unfamiliar voice of a woman.

"It seems his fever has slackened a lot. I would say he will be back to normal in a day or two."

"…Mmh?"

Zenjirou opened his eyes slightly and his gaze settled on an elegant looking woman in her middle years, who showed a soft smile and had her hand placed on his forehead.

"…Who?"

Not fully awake, he whispered absent-mindedly.

Straight, long hair in a pale chestnut-colour. Dark brown eyes puckered gracefully and darkened skin, not a natural tinge, but tanned from the sun.

The people from the Carpa Kingdom, like Aura, looked like a mixed race of a Latin and black person, whereat this middle-aged woman looked more like an European with her features and tinge.

She was obviously from a difference race than the people of the Carpa Kingdom. Zenjirou wasn't all that confident in his memory, but he would definitely remember someone with such characteristics if he had seen her before.

The foreign lady— Princess Isabelle removed her hand from his forehead, stood up from her chair and made an elegant curtsy while holding the hem of her dress.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Zenjirou-sama. My name is Isabelle. I am the third child of Johann IV, the eighteen Pope from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell.”

“Th- Thank you for your polite greeting. I am…”

Zenjirou tried to sit up on the bed in a hurry due to facing a state guest in the form of a Princess from a major power, but Princess Isabelle gently stopped him in an accustomed manner.

“Please remain as you are. Your body has not recovered yet.”

She urged him to lay down again by saying that.

Zenjirou noticed something from her remark.

“Eh? Oh? But I’m feeling awfully well…”

As he had been laying down the whole time, his entire body still felt somewhat uncomfortable, because he couldn’t muster much strength, but the sharp headache that had addled him, or the exhaustion and drowsiness that had eaten into every nook of his body before his nap, had vanished completely. He felt like he could get up without any problems now.

Princess Isabelle, still showing him a gentle smile, put one hand on Zenjirou’s shoulder as he had tried to get up, and pushed him back onto the bed.

“Zenjirou-sama, you have to keep lying down. You feel better now because I have cast ‘stamina recovery’ and ‘relief of mental fatigue’ on you just a moment ago. I could have used ‘cure-all‘, but it is a matter of the ‘Blessing of the Forest’. You will not receive the blessing unless you overcome it by yourself, so I dared to leave it untouched.”

“O- Okay… I see.”

Now that she mentioned it, his body still felt hot even if his stamina was back. He seemingly hadn’t fully recovered from the illness yet.

(Oh, reminds me, last night, Aura said that I’ve to switch rooms, because the Princess from the Twin Kingdom will come to pay me a visit)

Zenjirou had been more or less informed about the circumstances beforehand, but he have had a fever of over thirty-eight degrees until yesterday after all. Naturally, he didn’t remember any details.

(Ehm, from what I remember, my social position is higher, but it shouldn’t cause any problems when I humble myself, because I‘m on the receiving end of her “cure“ this time…?)

Wracking his dulled brain to the max, Zenjirou recalled the etiquette for dealing with foreign royalty that he had learned in his lessons.

Laying on the bed, he viewed his surroundings and noticed that his beloved wife was looking at him from behind the sitting Princess Isabelle.

When Aura met his eyes, she made a curt nod without saying anything.

(Does that mean I don’t have to worry about etiquette all that much?)

Zenjirou calmed down a bit as he somehow guessed her intention, leaned his head against the headboard and turned his head towards Princess Isabelle in a position, where only his upper body was sitting up for a bit.

“You have my gratitude, Princess Isabelle. I feel a lot better thanks to you.”

“Do not mention it. Now you only need rest and nourishing food, then you will be up again tomorrow.”

“Yes, understood… Mmg.”

As he had gotten up and continued to speak despite still having a slight fever, his voice cracked at the end of his sentence and he coughed shortly.

“Zenjirou, drink some water.”

Aura, standing at the back, took a small feeding cup in hand without a moment's delay and brought it to his mouth as he was laying on the bed.

"Ah, thanks."

Zenjirou had become used to Aura taking care of him in the last few days, so he drank from the feeding cup in her hand without showing any embarrassment.

"Fuh…"

"Better now?"

"Yeah, much better. Thanks."

Princess Isabelle witnessed the natural harmonious couple and laughed a bit with her right hand in front of her mouth.

"I have heard the rumours, but you two really get along."

"Ah… I beg your pardon."

"Well, better than the other way around."

In contrast to Zenjirou, who got a bit bashful from being watched by an outsider, Aura smiled broadly and declared proudly.

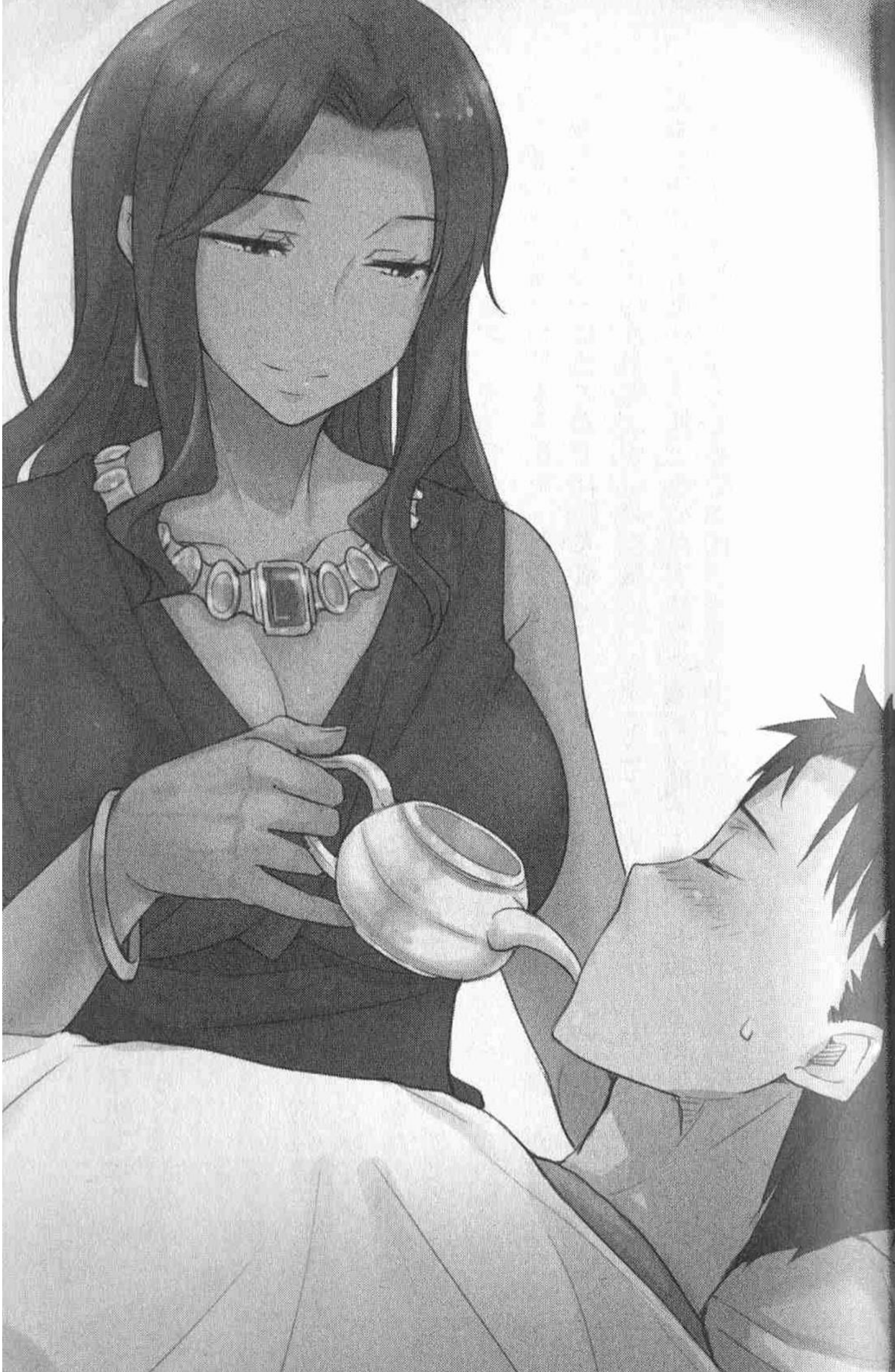
The Queen was well-known as a lady of character while her husband was a complete nobody. Aura was somewhat convinced that diverse and ignominious rumours were spreading in foreign countries. It would be a pity to miss the opportunity to propagate how extremely well she got along with her husband.

"Indeed, I can only concur with that."

Princess Isabelle agreed with Aura and chuckled.

The public tended to misunderstand, but "happy couples" were not rare in the world of royalty and nobility. Of course it was an undeniable fact that their marriages were made more in favour of family connections or balance of power instead of the feelings of the involved, but for that reason, the married couple then strived for a harmonious relationship afterwards.

Both parties shouldered responsibilities of a family or country. It was by no means impossible that they fell in love some time after their marriage when they were ready to approach one another without a fatal clash of interest.



Still, it was definitely an extremely rare case that a couple showed a harmonic sympathy like Aura and Zenjirou, not even half a year after their marriage.

(I assume they must be a really good match?)

Princess Isabelle hid her observant eyes behind a gentle smile and watched over Aura and Zenjirou's behaviour.

"Come to think of it, Zenjirou-sama, you came from a different world to marry Her Highness Aura. True love knows no bounds, so to speak?"

"Eh? Ah, yeah, that's right."

For a moment, Zenjirou was surprised about Princess Isabelle mentioning "him coming from a different world", but he calmed down right away when he gave it some thought.

It was a wide-spread fact that the bloodline magic of the Carpa Royalty was "Space-Time Magic". Royalty and titled nobility from every country were bound to keep a close eye on the marriage of Aura, the Queen from the Carpa Kingdom and last member of its royalty.

By that logic, it would be strange instead if nothing about Zenjirou's background was known as he suddenly became the Prince Consort.

He must have come to such a conclusion. Or maybe his reasoning was still not up to par due to the fever?

"150 years ago, my ancestors eloped into my world for love and I, their descendant, have now returned to marry. If you think about it like that, it is quite moving."

Zenjirou unintentionally revealed delicate information to royalty from a foreign country.

Standing on the site, Aura contorted her face as if to say "Oh no!", but it was too late.

"Oho… Something like that happened in the past…"

Princess Isabelle gave an agreeable response in an admiring tone, but her soft expression turned vigilant for just a second.

"…It is a rumour at best. Although it is the truth that a direct descent of the royal family was erased from the records 150 years ago, there is not a single proof that he eloped into a different world, much less that Zenjirou is a descendent of him."

Aura's tone was calm as she said that, but it outright denied the credibility of the information Zenjirou had revealed carelessly.

Zenjirou aside as he wasn't himself from the fever, it was unthinkable that Princess Isabelle, experienced in diplomatic negotiations, would misunderstand what Aura was trying to say.

"…Yes, certainly. Forgive me. Despite my age, I become overly excited about romantic love stories, so I ended up making an indiscreet remark.

To begin with, it is hardly commendable to involve a sick person into a long conversation, even if he is on the road to recovery.

Zenjirou-sama, Your Highness Aura, I will excuse myself now."

Princess Isabelle discerned the meaning behind Aura's words and raised from her chair while saying that tactfully.

"Yes, alright. Let me express my gratitude to you for helping my husband. Thank you, Princess Isabelle."

"You are more than welcome, Your Highness Aura."

Aura herself walked the departing Princess Isabelle out of the provisory bedroom.

That neither of them showed even a shred of their tension proved that they were "born royalty".

"You have my thanks, Princess Isabelle. I feel a lot better now."

Only Zenjirou was unable to read the mood and thoughtlessly expressed his gratitude from behind the leaving Princess and Queen, still laying on his bed like he had been instructed to.

* * *

The night of the same day.

Aura had called Secretary Fabio and Archmage Espaldion into her private chamber in the royal palace and chaired a secret meeting.

This room, one of the smaller ones in the palace, was illuminated by the flames of the candles burning on the candle stands.

Bathed in the red light of the flames, Aura crossed her legs on top of a chair with an elaborated design and address Secretary Fabio, who stood diagonally to the left in front of her.

“Well then, let me hear your report.”

“Yes.”

The middle-aged secretary took one step forward when his master called out to him, and started to speak with his usual monotone voice.

“We identified the ‘client’ of Princess Isabelle. It was the former king from the Kobrag Kingdom: Luis II.”

The Queen inclined her head with an unsatisfied expression upon the secretary’s report.

“The former king from the Kobrag Kingdom? How odd. To say nothing of the current king, I cannot believe that the Kobrag Kingdom can afford to call Princess Isabelle for their former king.”

The Kobrag Kingdom was a neighbouring country with a shared border to the Carpa Kingdom, but their territory as well as their population only amounted to a fifth of the Carpa Kingdom. Needless to say, their assets were accordingly lower, too.

It survived the previous war only by chance due to its strategic location and it made no sense that such a small country called Princess Isabelle for the sake of an old man that already abdicated the throne.

“Prince Robert, Prince Thomas or at best, the younger brother of the pope, Matteo would be more appropriate for the wallet of the Kobrag Kingdom, would you not agree?”

Aura mentioned the names of members of the pope lineage of Jilbell. All of them were “healers” one or two level inferior to Princess Isabelle, but their treatment was accordingly cheaper.

The secretary in his middle years objected Aura’s sound argument without showing as much as a fissure in his inexpressive mask.

“However, all of the aforementioned are males. They would be unable to enter the inner palace.”

Aura kept her head tilted in puzzlement from the increasingly cryptic answer, and asked back.

“Why does the inner palace matter? The patient was former king Luis, was he not?”

“Yes. So it does not concern the inner palace of the Kobrag Kingdom, but rather the inner palace of our Carpa Kingdom.”

Aura finally discerned the intention of her secretary from his supplementation and wriggled about on her chair.

“! In other words, you mean that Princess Isabelle planned to come here from the very beginning?”

As the Queen displayed her anger, her secretary confirmed it bluntly.

“Yes. It is still under investigation, but it appears that the Kobrag Kingdom requested the dispatch of Prince Robert, just as you have conjectured, Your Highness. The truth of the affair seems to be that the Twin Kingdom then imposed ‘sending Princess Isabelle instead of Prince Robert for the same price’ on them.”

“Are you implying that that the Twin Kingdom even picked up on my husband catching the ’Blessing of the Forest’?”

This time, the middle-age secretary shook his head to her question.

“No, I would say that was a coincidence. On the contrary, if they had known that Zenjirou-sama was sick in bed, it would not have been necessary to dispatch Her Highness Isabelle.”

The “healers” from the Jilbell lineage were an existence more extraordinary than physicians. Under the justification of examining a patient, even males were allowed to step into the inner palace, ignoring the gender barrier.

If they had known beforehand that Zenjirou was a “patient”, it ought to be unnecessary that they specially dispatch a female member.

“I see. Quite indeed. In that case, the Twin Kingdom dispatched Princess Isabelle for a cheaper price just to catch a glimpse on my husband.”

“A Prince Consort suddenly appeared in our Carpa Kingdom. It would hardly be an unnatural approach to learn of his nature.”

“Mhm…”

Still crossing her legs on top of the chair, Aura placed her hand against her chin and became absorbed in thought.

Secretary Fabio was indeed making a sound argument. Zenjirou absolutely sympathized with Aura’s objective and took a backseat without voicing a selfishness, but in the eyes of foreign people, who weren’t aware of that, it only appeared like the Carpa Kingdom gained another helmsman.

The odds were that the southern continent would be once again thrown into turmoil by the Carpa Kingdom if the Prince Consort happened to be extraordinarily ambitious.

By that logic, it might certainly be important enough to dispatch someone of Princess Isabelle’s calibre to “learn of Zenjirou’s nature”.

“His debut in our country is only just over, but one for the foreign countries follows right away, eh?”

“The previous banquet had excluded foreign guests as to keep any damage to a minimum if he were to be caught tripping, so it was inevitable.”

Aura looked up to the dark ceiling and sighed, whereat Secretary Fabio said that with a serene tone.

Zenjirou’s will of “not interfering in politics with all his might” was only acknowledged to a certain extent within the Carpa Kingdom itself. It would still require a lot of time and effort to spread the correct insight to the people of foreign countries.

In addition, this kind of information had the quirk of being easily distorted the further and longer it travelled. From the beginning, it might be wiser to give up on trying to spread the correct insight to a hundred percent.

“…Okay, good. Enough about that for the time being.”

Aura shook her head once, then again and brought the matter to a closure.

After that, she shifted her gaze from Secretary Fabio towards the old man, who stood diagonally on the right side in front of her, clad in a purple robe.

“Next up, are you in the picture, old geezer?”

The attention suddenly turned towards the old man in the purple robe— The royal Archmage Espaldion spoke leisurely.

“Mhm, the personal belonging of Zenjirou-sama, namely his gems, right? Fifty gold coins for a single one of them is certainly unusual.”

The topic changed from Princess Isabelle to the marbles, which she had estimated to be worth an unreasonable high amount.

As even Espaldion, just like Secretary Fabio, agreed with her, Aura nodded satisfied for now and pressed him on.

“I find it hard to believe that Princess Isabelle would give such an abnormal estimate without reason. Old geezer, can you think of anything?”

“…….Hmm.”

The country’s best magician stroked his long beard upon the Queen’s question and fell silent for a while, then opened his mouth with a prelude of “This is to be taken with a pinch of salt”.

“Your Highness, how much do you know about the ‘Staff of the Storm Wall’ from the Gupta Kingdom?”

Being asked that all of a sudden, Aura frowned puzzled while she answered truthfully.

“You mean that ‘miracle of the Barang Mountain Pass’, right? Where a single magic tool stalled an enemy army of fifty-thousand for half a year.”

Espaldion assented with Aura’s answer.

“Correct. The battle between the Gupta Kingdom and the allied forces of the Kushal Kingdom and the Waltana Kingdom, which took place in the early phase of the previous war.”

To put it simply: The Gupta Kingdom was attacked in a pincer movement by two bordering countries, and during this life-threatening crisis, they protected one border with the magic tool called ‘Staff of the Storm Wall’ while the other invading country was warded off with their own troops, thus successfully defending the country.

It was most likely one of the most powerful magic tools on the South Continent. “Lightning” was the bloodline magic of the Gupta Royal Family.

In other words, the ‘Staff of the Storm Wall’ was a magic tool created by the combined effort of the Gupta lineage with their “lightning” and the Sharrow lineage with their “bestowal”.

The Gupta Kingdom was on good terms with the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, much like a vassal state, so it was not all that unusual that their royalties worked together to make a magic tool.

However, Espaldion spoke up.

“The problem is the time needed for creating the staff. I will spare you of the details now, but the staff was made in the capital of the Twin Kingdom without a doubt.”

“Well, I would imagine so. Unlike the Jilbell lineage, the people of the Sharrow lineage do not leave the capital unless it is something important.”

Aura expressed her consent with a curt nod, whereat Espaldion inclined his head deeply and continued.

“That would mean that a person of the Gupta lineage went to the capital of the Twin Kingdom and spent a long time there to create the staff, then returned home with the staff. However, the timeframe is too short for that.”

Secretary Fabio, standing on the side, seemed to recall something from hearing Espaldion’s story and interjected.

“Oh, I have heard about that matter, too. I think that even if you calculate the round trip with the fastest raptorial dragon, the person from the Gupta Family would had less than ten days for his stay in the capital of the Twin Kingdom.”

“Nine days to be precise. And that, too, is under the assumption that everything went well during the travel. It is said that a realistic calculation would give the person of the Gupta Family nearly three days for his stay in the capital.”

While listening to her two trusted retainers, Aura went through her own memory.

In the first phase of the previous war, Aura had not been born yet. So it was not weird that she had no recollection of it.

But she did understand the odd part about the story. It was said that even the simplest disposable “magic tool” created by the Sharrow royal lineage usually took at least one month to manufacture. Not to mention that it was common knowledge that a large magic tool like the “Staff of the Storm Wall” required years.

Aura remembered that her “Barrier Carpet”, currently lent to Zenjirou, had required a member of the Carpa Royal Family to remain in the capital of the Twin Kingdom for two years when it was made.

One month for a simple tool. Two years for a tool on the level of a national treasure. Compared to that, the three day period for the “Staff of the Storm Wall” was obviously abnormal.

Although she trusted the old geezer, Aura couldn’t take his words at face value and replied doubtfully.

“Would it not be the simple solution that the person from the Gupta lineage secretly went to the capital of the Twin Kingdom already well before and they started to work on it in secret?”

The Queen questioned his opinion, but the aged magician wasn’t offended and answered while inclining his head deeply.

“Yes. Both sides officially claim that to be the case. Others, too, accept that theory as the most plausible. However, a different theory is still irrefutable these days, too.

Namely, that the Sharrow lineage has a ‘secret technique’ for drastically shortening the required time for creating a magic tool when the necessity arises.”

“Hmm, I see.”

Aura felt that they finally got to the real issue at hand and made a small sigh as if snorting.

Such rumours of “hidden magics or secret techniques from royal families” existed in all ages.

The “Mind Search Magic” from the Harkonen Royal Family was rumoured to be a skill to permanently turn people into puppets. The “Gardening Magic” from the Bernhard Royal Family was rumoured to have gone out of control and created the desert on the South Continent as a result. The “Creation Magic” of the Makarov Royal Family was rumoured to have grown this land. Etc, etc.

In fact, there was even a rumour regarding the “Space-Time Magic” of the Carpa Royal Family, to which Aura could only smile wryly with “spare me”.

It claimed that the ultimate secret technique of the “Space-Time Magic” could “resurrect the dead” by turning back the clock.

As Aura knew the truth, she couldn’t resist to give a snigger.

(If such a magic were to exist, I would have revived one of my brothers instead of disturbing the peaceful life of my husband in a different world)

No matter how ridiculous it was, Aura was unable to break out in an unreserved laughter, because she knew that there was a germ of truth in that rumour.

(Resurrect the dead, eh? Well, it is not impossible for the “dead” of the likes of bugs and shellfishes)

Truth be told, there really existed a spell amongst the “Space-Time Magic” that could turn back time to a limited extent.

That said, it had strict conditions like “cannot be cast on targets with magical power” or “the practitioner must have touched the object with his hands and seen it with his eyes in the time line he wanted to return it to“, so it was hardly practicable.

All living beings in this world, except for lower animals like bugs or shellfishes, had more or less magical power.

Due to that, “resurrecting the dead” with “Space-Time Magic” was impossible in reality. It was also impossible to repair magic tools.

It was possible to repair stuff without magical power like a broken sword or cooking utensils that had become impractical, but it was way more efficient to just buy these things anew instead of using the secret royal magic for it.

Anyway, it was the truth that the “Space-Time Magic” could resurrect the dead, even if it was something boring like “only bringing bugs back to life”.

Considering that fact, the rumours about the royal families of the other countries might contain some truth as well.

Aura licked over her upper lip and posed a question.

“So, what kind of rumours regarding the ‘secret technique’ do you know about, old geezer?”

“Very well. One says that the Sharrow Royal Family can drastically shorten the time for creating a magic tool by the means of spending their life-force. And in fact, one member of the royal family died of illness almost directly after the ‘Staff of the Storm Wall’ was made.”

Aura dismissed the first rumour Espaldion mentioned.

“Impossible. Sure, the Gupta Kingdom is a precious ally to the Twin Kingdom and they protect the important north, but considering their temperament, it is unthinkable that the Sharrow lineage would sacrifice one of their kin for them.”

“Yes. I am of the same mind. So I regard it merely as a coincidence. But there is one more prominent rumour.

It claims that the ‘Bestowal Magic’ can be cut short on time and effort considerably when an object with certain conditions is prepared.”

Aura felt like she had finally heard the answered to her first question after a long detour.

She kept silent for a while, then asked slowly with a low voice.

“…So, what does the ‘Staff of Storm Wall’ look like?”

“As it is the best-protected magic tool of the royal family, it is nothing but a rumour from hearsay, but I learned that apparently it is a straight wooden staff decorated with a ’large, transparent and round crystal’ at its tip.”

“…Oho. That is quite the intriguing ‘rumour’.”

Aura’s face, illuminated by the light of the candles, showed a broad grin. That smile resembled the expression of a feline carnivore as it bared its fangs.

Chapter 03: The Queen's Pregnancy

"Uhh, Kuh!"

Zenjirou stretched his whole body to the limit, easing its stiffness, amidst the morning sun shining through the open windows after he had changed from the pyjamas into a T-shirt and trousers for the first time in eight days.

The morning sun was still touched with red and the refreshing breeze, blowing in from the window, gently brushed over his body.

"Hah…The common saying 'health is the greatest good' sure proves to be true."

Bathed in the morning sun, Zenjirou craned his neck and muttered emotional.

He had been sick in bed from the "Blessing of the Forest" for seven days. The physician had diagnosed his full recovery yesterday. As the exanimation had been late in the day, he had only taken a bath, a real one for the first time in seven days, last night and then went to sleep prudently.

Due to that, Zenjirou himself felt that he was "fit and well from today on".

"Come to think of, today's temperature… Oh, just around twenty degrees. It's gone down quite a bit. No wonder it's so refreshing."

Looking at the thermometer on the wall, he checked the scale with the red fluid and raised a slightly surprised voice.

Although it was always chillier at dawn, it certainly was more comfortable when the temperatures dropped down to twenty degrees.

At this rate, it might be acceptable to spend the whole day without using ice or the fan today.

It was necessary after all that he got used to the climate of this country and it was easier done when the highest temperature stopped at around thirty degrees, since he couldn't stand the days, where the temperature surpassed his body temperature.

"I can't tell how long the fan or refrigerator will last after all."

He didn't want to call it to mind, but the lifespan of the electrical appliances was way shorter than a human's. Since he had no replacements, the day, where he had to part with the electrical appliances, drew unavoidably closer.

And even before the appliances stopped working, it was quite likely that he would have to leave the inner palace again, like during the previous banquet, and expose himself to the scorching heat of the Carpa Kingdom. Or alternatively, he would have to hide the electrical appliances when a guest visited him like during the sick bed visit from Princess Isabelle.

In view of the future, it would be by no means pointless to get himself accustomed to the climate here while he still had the electrical leeway.

"Aw, I feel so weak. Though that's only natural. Maybe I'll do some toning or ball juggling exercises.

I think I brought an air pump and my old soccer ball along."

Zenjirou mumbled to himself as he touched his body over his T-shirt and trousers.

It wasn't unusual that the body started to weaken beyond a mere weariness when you stayed in bed for a whole week.

It would be dangerous in various ways to return to his shut-in lifestyle like this. Zenjirou could pass up on having a constitution, where he was out of breath just from getting up or walking around, at his young age, so he felt the need to impose some training on himself.

"It should be fine if I just get out into the garden, where the generator is located. I really need to move around for a bit."

After fishing the white-black soccer ball out of the corner of the room, Zenjirou let it bounce on the carpet to check if it had enough air and said that.

So far, he had carelessly enjoyed his shut-in lifestyle to the fullest, albeit thinking “my body’s withering away”, but now that he had fallen sick once, he fully realized how important it was to preserve his physical strength.

The physical fitness could make the difference between life or death. It was worth falling sick just to realize that.

“Whoops. It’s a bit dangerous to juggle the ball here.”

After juggling the ball a few times with the instep of his left foot, Zenjirou caught a slightly missed kick in his hands and stopped the juggling for now, looking around the room.

This room, used as a living room by him, was “ridiculous large” compared to the common standard in Japan, but the power cords from all the electrical appliances stretched through the room in all directions, starting from the control unit of the generator standing near the wall, as if they were owning the place.

He had set them along the walls as much as possible as not to trip over them, but considering the position of the appliances and the length of the cables, some of them had to cross straight through the room here and there.

It would be a disaster if he were to get entangled in them by mischance.

“The best bet would be to convert an empty room into an exercise room. Many of them are unused anyway.”

Just in the moment he muttered that,

“Excuse me, Zenjirou-sama. I am here with your requested goods.”

the entrance door was knocked and then a voice could be heard, to which Zenjirou replied at once.

“Yes, I’m coming.”

Answering like that, he put the soccer ball under his arm on the couch and headed for the door.

Opening the door was the job of the waiting maid, but Zenjirou suspected that her hands were occupied from her words “with your requested goods”, so he opened the door from his end.

And like he had expected, the waiting maid with unusual blonde hair for the Carpa Kingdom, held a wooden plate with both her hands, her back straightened up.

“The kitchen staff has made it according to your instructions.”

Saying so, the waiting maid served him thinly sliced bananas fried in oil. Sea salt was sprinkled over them as the only seasoning.

The snack called “banana chips” was known in modern Japan, too, but he had them made these as a replacement for potato chips.

The mashed banana dish he had eaten when he was sick, was close to potatoes in taste, so he had arranged that the cooking plantain were prepared just like potato chips as an experiment.

“Oh, let me try one.”

Zenjirou took one banana chip from the plate the waiting maid presented him, and threw it into his mouth. Then he masticated the still warm chip with a crunching sound.

“Mm…”

The plain taste of salt and high-class vegetable oil spread in his mouth. As the fundamental intergradient was different, it was hardly anything like the original potato chips, but the taste was good enough for a substitute.

“How is it, Zenjirou-sama?”

“Yes, good. But they’re a tad too thick. I wish you would cut them a bit more thinner next time.”

“Very well. I will pass it on accordingly.”

“Good.”

Zenjirou took the wooden plate from the waiting maid as she lowered her head curtly, and closed the door with these words.

Back in the room, Zenjirou put the plate on the low table and sat down on the couch.

“Hmm, they’re a bit hard, but a good alternative to potato chips. They aren’t sweet like a banana dessert either.”

The taste was more nostalgic than delicious.

It had been a few month since Zenjirou came into this world. He considered it to be too early to miss Japan yet, but it was an undeniable fact that he had recalled the Japanese food numerous times when he was sick in bed until yesterday.

Zenjirou didn’t fancy himself as a person that made a fuss over food and in fact, he hadn’t anything to complain about regarding the food in this world so far. However, he had realized during his illness that it was a different matter altogether when he was weakened in mind and body.

He didn’t intend to be wilful or self-indulgent, but it might not be all that bad to reproduce the Japanese cuisine here within the limits of feasibility by asking the kitchen staff of the inner palace (speaking of, Aura had told him “Do as you please” with a beaming smile in response to it).

Zenjirou had more or less stopped eating snacks once he became a working adult, but now that he had tasted the “deliciousness” of pseudo-potato chips, he could no longer ignore a nostalgia due to his palate.

“I’m glad that sugar is nothing unusual in this country. Maybe I’ll experiment a bit on the sweet front? Ah, but while eggs are viable, I think it’s nearly impossible to get any milk products. So it must be sweets without milk or butter… Hmm, did I bring any recipes like that?”

The livestock in the Carpa Kingdom, whose climate was close to the tropical forest, was generally “dragons”— meaning reptiles. Needless to say, reptiles didn’t produce milk. And although they did lay eggs, the eggs of reptiles were rather different from the eggs of birds.

That said, it wasn’t fundamentally impossible to raise mammals here, since he knew that even countries with strict environments in Indian or Equatorial Africa, sharing the same heat as the Carpa Kingdom, managed to raise cows or pigs without problems.

For instance, some places like the palace managed to raise a bird that resembled a chicken as a livestock.

The reason that mammals generally weren’t raised as livestock on the South Continent was more due to the ecosystem on the continent and cultural customs up to this point rather than the problematic climate.

“If I could somehow obtain some milk, I could make them build a manual centrifuge and try to make some butter or fresh cream. Ah, but, I didn’t bring a microwave oven, so it would be difficult to make sweets myself, even if I’ve the ingredients.”

Although he had lived by himself for seven years during his university and salaryman days, his cooking skills didn’t amount to much.

His cooking repertoire only consisted of “curry”, “stew”, “hashed meat with rice” or simple fried stuff from a single fry-pan like fried rice with vegetables.

To begin with, it wouldn’t be all too admirable when Zenjirou, a royalty, stood in the kitchen. Considering the waiting maids’ responsibilities, it was better to assume that the option of “cooking by himself” didn’t exist.

“In that case, I can only teach the recipe to the kitchen staff once I thought of a feasible dish after taking a look at the available ingredients.”

Sitting on the couch and picking at the banana chips, Zenjirou muttered that while preparing a DVD to watch as a pastime.

* * *

At night of the same day, Aura and Zenjirou finally had some quality time again in their room of the inner palace after dinner and a bath.

“In short, you want to exercise a bit to keep in shape?”

“Yeah, that’s the gist of it. What do you say? May I turn the courtyard or a room in the inner palace into my practice room?”

Aura and Zenjirou sat intimately snuggled together with their shoulders touching on the same couch and talked.

They discussed Zenjirou’s idea from this morning: “exercise to stay healthy”.

Originally, Zenjirou was the master of the inner palace, so he didn’t need to get the permission from anyone to use a random room of the inner palace for juggling or to dribble in the courtyard, but that he asked Aura for every little thing showed how much he lacked self-awareness as the “master of the inner palace”.

“Mhm, I do not know what kind of exercise this so called soccer is, but if you want to keep yourself in shape, why not try your hand at martial arts? It does not hurt to learn the ‘ten arts’.”

Aura put a banana chip from the wooden plate on the table into her mouth after saying that.

“Ten arts?”

Zenjirou repeated the unfamiliar term like a parrot, whereat Aura explained the ten arts to him in detail.

“Right. It refers to the ten martial arts that a soldier is supposed to learn in the Carpa Kingdom: Running, Spearmanship, Archery, Riding on Dragons, Tree Climbing, Swimming, Camping Outside, Stone Throwing, Swordsmanship and Barehanded Fighting.

Nevertheless, only a handful of knights have mastered all of them. Only three of them, namely running, spearmanship and archery are essential. Knights-in-training have to learn riding on dragons on top of that. One or two more of the rest are refined as special skills.”

“Oho…”

Zenjirou raised a voice of admiration. Was it similar to the “Eighteen Arms of Wushu” carried over to old Japan? Now in his twenties, he didn’t think he could properly learn one this late in the game, but his interest was piqued. However, he replied after musing for a bit.

“Sounds interesting, but who would teach them to me?”

“Mh? Of course I would select a capable instructor from the royal army for you.”

Aura replied while picking up a banana chip, whereupon Zenjirou showed an expression that seemed to say “figured as much”. Then he shook his head distinctly.

“That won’t be any good. It would be a man, right? That means, I would’ve to leave the inner palace to attend lessons. And that probably complicates matters to no end. Besides, having a ‘master-pupil relationship’, even if it’s limited to martial arts, seems troubling in various ways.”

Zenjirou answered like that while recalling the faces of the club advisers from the soccer clubs in middle and high school.

They had been simple advisers for the clubs, but still deserved to be called “teachers”, so when he ran into them on the streets, he had reflexively stood at attention. And it would surely have an even greater effect on him if it was his instructor for lethal martial arts.

It went without saying that a person would try to approach Zenjirou in some kind of way due to the chance of being his “instructor”.

Being involved with one such troublesome person, namely his magic teacher Octavia, was enough for him.

Aura couldn’t hide her wry smile as she replied to him after swallowing the banana chip.

“Zenjirou, you do not need to be so considerate. You may conduct yourself a bit more as you please. I am prepared to make it happen to a permissible amount.”

Zenjirou scratched his head upon his wife’s answer

“Well, of course I don’t want to cause you any trouble, but if anything, this is more about my own conveniences. Simply put, I’m interested in martial arts, but not so much as to raise trouble for myself.”

and replied with that.

“…..”

Aura kept silent for a while, then looked into the eyes of her husband sitting next to her.

In the end, she nodded with “fine”, as she realised that Zenjirou was telling the truth.

“Then I will not press you any further. Still, when you say that you want to learn martial arts without being tied to a complicated person and without leaving the inner palace, then shall I teach you when I have time?”

Zenjirou inadvertently widened his eyes towards Aura’s surprising proposal.

“Eh? You?”

As her husband asked back, Aura threw a couple of banana chips at one go into her mouth and replied affirmative while chewing.

“Yes. Although I only have mastered the basic three skills plus riding and swordsmanship.”

Come to think of it, Aura had survived in a world of war. It was nothing unusual to know a military skill or two. Zenjirou said to his wife convinced with sparkling eyes.

“Wow, that’s amazing. Then I’ll take you up on it whenever you’re free.”

“Good, you can count on me.”

Aura nodded satisfied upon his reply and picked up a couple more banana chips from the wooden plate.

“…..”

“…..”

The crunching sound of Aura eating the banana chips resounded through the room of the inner palace for a little while longer.

In no time, the heap of banana chips had decreased so much that the bottom of the wooden plate became visible. Incidentally, Zenjirou had only eaten a handful.

When Aura reached out for the plate one more time after she swallowed the chips in her mouth, Zenjirou spoke up as he could no longer stand on the sidelines.

“Hey, my dear wife.”

“Mh? What is it, my dear husband?”

His wife only turned her head towards him while still holding onto the banana chips with her right hand. Zenjirou faltered for a moment, then opened his mouth without hesitation.

“I’m glad you like the sweets from my hometown, but I think you better stop now. It might not look like it, but they use quite a bit of oil. I’m a bit worried about my wife’s health.”

The large plate had been full to the brim with banana chips. Way too much for a little snack and overcharged with calories.

“Mh? Now that you mention it. Guess it was too much.”

Aura finally stopped reaching out for the banana chips upon her husband’s words. Zenjirou stood up from the couch, took a chilled towel form the refrigerator and gave it to Aura.

“Here, wipe the oil from your hands.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“I guess it’s because you didn‘t finish your dinner? But you shouldn’t fill your stomach with this junk food.”

The extremely unusual rebuke of her husband made Aura shrug her shoulders rightfully as she wiped her hands, sitting on the couch.

“Mhm, I have nothing to say back. But the fish dish tonight was just crude.”

The Carpa Kingdom spanned wide enough to have a coastline, but the capital with the palace was located in the deepest interior of the country. Therefore all fish dishes in the palace were made from river fishes without exception.

Generally, river fishes often tasted cruder than saltwater fishes.

However, Zenjirou tilted his head puzzled upon Aura's excuse.

"Eh, really? I wouldn't say that the fish tasted crude in particular today."

Zenjirou himself had only ever eaten saltwater fishes in Japan, so he disliked river fishes a bit. Wouldn't he notice it first when the fish tasted noticeable crude, since Aura was used to river fishes instead?

That was what he thought, but the sense of taste or smell were affected by your physical condition after all.

His own senses must have been dulled as he had been ill not long ago. Zenjirou concluded that all by himself and didn't pursue the matter any further.

"I usually do not like flavourful dishes that do not skimp on oil like fried stuff in the first place. But for some reason, I could not help myself today."

After Aura diligently wiped the oil from the banana chips off her right hand with the towel, she made an excuse like that, but Zenjirou naturally didn't buy it.

"No, it's hardly convincing to say that after you nearly emptied the whole plate."

Her husband sat down next to her again with these words, whereat Aura pursed her mouth up displeased and made more excuses.

"Well, I agree, but it is the truth. If I have to choose, I would say that I am not fond of flavourful oil dishes. It does not go as far as disgust, but I would never crave for them… Normally, I mean."

"Yeah, sure, sure. Let's save the rest for tomorrow, okay."

Back on the couch, Zenjirou brushed it off by saying that and put a cover over the plate with the banana chips.

"Hmm…"

Aura wanted to object, but realized that she was currently at a disadvantage, so she changed the topic while refraining from protesting any further.

"Oh, reminds me, I handed over our 'wedding rings' to Princess Isabelle to have them made into magic tools. Also, I presented her one of these 'marbles', since she estimated them for me. Forgive me for not consulting you as you were sick in bed."

She made a pretty obvious topic change on a rare occasion, but Zenjirou had no interest in teasing his wife excessively, so he obediently accepted the new topic.

"Ah, no problem. They were only a backup for when the summoning fails anyway. I already told you that I'm leaving the decision about what to do with them to you."

"Yes, you did. Then I will gladly do so. However, the marbles have gotten a higher price than I expected, so I would like to talk about it with you, since they belong to you."

Aura assumed a slightly serious expression again and sat back down on the couch, starting to explain swiftly.

"Hmm, fifty gold coins for a single marble, huh."

After Zenjirou heard out Aura's whole story, he didn't quite get the point of it.

"If I remembered correctly, one gold coins is more or less worth a hundred silver coins? But I've no clue about the prices in this world, so just saying fifty gold coins doesn't tell me anything."

After all, he came from a different world. Moreover, he had never bought anything, nor paid for food, because he had shut himself into the inner palace ever since he came here.

Since he had written the tax yields of every region into his computer, he knew at least the general currencies, but to be honest, it didn't feel real to him.

"With fifty gold coins, a lower class noble can buy a house that barely allows him to keep face. As the price for a single jewellery, it is exorbitant."

"A whole house? That's certainly amazing."

Zenjirou comprehended a bit of its amazing magnitude from the example.

(In Japanese yen, a whole house would cost several millions. Ah, but the prices for a property or the house itself might not be as high as in modern Japan)

For now, it should suffice when he simply internalized that the price surpassed his own estimate by far. Zenjirou told himself that and brought the matter to end for now.

“A different world means different prices. I anticipated that, but I’m still a bit surprised.”

“That sounds like these so-called marbles had a rather trivial price in your world?”

Zenjirou casually replied to the curious Aura.

“Yeah, it’s cheap stuff. Simply said, they’re toys for children. One is worth ten yen, thirty if it’s an expensive one.

Oh, by ‘yen’ I mean the general currency of my country. The prices here are different, so you can’t covert them one-to-one, but know that a new-build house would cost at least ten million yen at the cheapest.”

Aura swiftly calculated in her head upon his words and said groaning.

“Considering these numbers, it would mean that two marbles could be bought with one silver coin.”

In fact, the calculation would vary every time depending on whether you extrapolated it to labour wages, to the price of staple food like wheat or rice, or to the cost of a single average meal. Therefore, a single silver coin couldn’t be equalled with twenty yen, but it sufficed for a rough calculation.

One marble was originally worth around ten yen, but here it was worth fifty gold coins. That was roughly a million times the value.

“Yeah, so I was certainly a bit surprised. If we were to mass-produce marbles here, I’ll become a billionaire in no time? Ah, no. It’s so valuable, because it’s so rare. If we were to flood the market with them, the price would plummet and all would be in vain.”

Zenjirou kept on talking about ideas and discarding them, but Aura stopped listening to them midway.

The all too shocking word she had heard in the middle of the sentence kind of stopped her train of thought and she grabbed the arm of her husband in that state.

“Aura?”

“…Wait a moment. What did you just say? Did you say ‘produce’?”

“Ah, yeah. I did, why…?”

Zenjirou, overwhelmed by his wife, who looked at him with glaring eyes and held his arm, answered like that while bending back.

He was obviously retreating from her, but in her current state, Aura had no leeway to concern herself with that.

She drew closer to him with a serious expression.

“Does that mean it is no mineral? I thought it was mined out of nature like crystals or agate…”

“N- No. Marbles are glass. They’re manmade from compounding stuff like sand and lime.”

“Sand and lime… Do you know how to produce it?”

Even Zenjirou knew what Aura hoped for after asking this much.

He repositioned himself on top of the couch and showed a wry smile, then shook his head.

“Nope. No way. Glass manufacture exists since before the common era, so I guess it wouldn’t be impossible to reproduce it in this world, too, but it requires some specialized knowledge and techniques. It’s not something an amateur like me can learn by imitating.”

Aura burst out in laughter right after hearing his answer.

“…I see. Guess it does not turn out that convenient after all.”

Still holding his right arm with both her hands, Aura hung her head dejected on top of the couch.

Zenjirou felt a needless guilt from seeing his wife completely disappointed and uttered comforting words out of reflex.

“Ah, but one of episodes on the DVDs I brought along should be about trying to make glass. I doubt we’ll be able to copy it from just watching it, but want to take a look anyway?”

Aura’s reaction to his words was once again dramatic.

“I do!”

“Okay, I’ll get it ready.”

Zenjirou gently loosened his wife’s tight grip on his right arm and stood up to get the DVD.

* * *

A couple of minutes later, Zenjirou and Aura faced the television, sitting intimately shoulder-to-shoulder on the couch.

The TV showed a certain show, paused by Zenjirou. The show revolved around a male idol group building a village from scratch and even trying their hand at agriculture. The chosen and played episode dealt with the attempt to make glass.

Next to Aura, who intensely glared at the screen with a serious expression, Zenjirou translated and explained the words of the characters or narrator while temporarily pausing the show numerous times with the remote control.

After all, the “soul of words” didn’t work on words transmitted through a machine. Without his interpretation, Aura couldn’t understand a single word that she heard from the screen.

“Ehm, temperatures over 1300 degree are needed to melt glass. So you first build a furnace out of ‘firebricks’ that can endure such heat.”

“Oho, I see. These so-called ‘firebricks’ alone seem to be quite worthwhile already. Incidentally, how hot is a temperature of 1300 degree?”

“Ehm… I think they said the melting temperature for cast iron was 1200 during the previous episode where they stroke the iron, so it’s a temperature hundred degrees higher than the one for melting the unclean and hard iron.”

“Oh! Even higher than for melting iron? There are no furnaces on the South Continent that can liquefy iron.”

“That means somewhere else there are?”

“Yes, the North Continent is the leading power in regards to iron manufacture. I heard that they have the techniques to melt and mint iron. In our country all iron is forged. We can mint copper and tin at best.”

“Oho, so a technological gap exists in this world, too.”

Aura had tracked the screen with a serious expression, but with Zenjirou’s explanation, her face gradually turned grimmer.

“Wait, what did they say just now?”

“That you won’t get ‘firebricks’ from just kneading normal clay. So they made them by mixing the clay with the grinded powder from broken ‘firebricks’.”

“…Then, how do you make them when you do not have any broken ‘firebricks’?”

“Good question.”

The DVD played on with Aura’s mood slightly sour.

She then listened to Zenjirou’s explanation again and raised a sharp voice.

“Wait. What did that mean?”

“Well, quite a high temperature is needed to burn the ‘firebricks’, so they built a special hearth for it.”

“And how did they build that hearth?”

“With ‘firebricks’ that they got from some other place.”

“…Then, where do you burn the firebricks when there is no place to get them from?”

“Good question.”

Zenjirou continued his explanation while trembling a bit in fear next to his wife, whose mood became even more sour.

It really was no use to get angry at him like that. This show was nothing but an entertainment program he had recorded and not a genuine manual for manufacturing glass. The technique to make glass wasn’t so simple that it could be learned just from watching this clip. He thought that he had told Aura that beforehand, but it seemed that it didn’t quite reach her.

Her hope for a possible manufacture of glass must have been too high.

Well, he could certainly sympathize with her dissatisfaction.

Even Zenjirou would go nuts for a bit when he was told that the moulds of clay, mixed with grinded “firebricks”, had to slowly burn in a hearth built with “firebricks” in the process of making “firebricks”.

It would be no different than writing “firebricks” into the list of required items in the manual for “making firebricks”. It certainly was a bit unreasonable.

“I mean, the first ‘firebricks’ were made without ‘firebricks’, correct? Do you know of that method?”

“No.”

“Uhh…”

Aura showed her full dissatisfaction on a rare occasion, so Zenjirou patted her back with his free hand.

“Calm down, my dear wife.”

“Impossible, my dear husband.”

“Whoa, whoa.”

“NEIGH, NEIGH.”

Seeing as Aura played along with Zenjirou’s jokes, her dissatisfaction must not be from the bottom of her heart.

“So, what now? It won’t be useful anyway, so want to stop here?”

Zenjirou confirmed the time with a side-glance to the clock and suggested that, but Aura mused for a bit, then shook her head.

“…No, we started it, so we might as well finish it. Who knows, there might actually be some kind of finding.”

“I doubt it.”

Zenjirou said it in a small voice like a whisper, so it didn’t seem to reach the Aura’s ears as she sat next to him.

At the time displayed on the clock, he would normally already be getting intimate with her in the bedroom.

As Zenjirou had slept the last seven days all alone due to his sickness, he had looked forward to tonight quite a bit, but he might have to “hold it in” for yet another night.

(Well, what choice do I have? Not like my wife will leave me)

“Then let’s continue, my dear wife.”

“…Okay, my dear husband.”

Zenjirou showed a wry smile in her bind spot, so that she couldn’t see it, and twined the hand he had on the back of his beloved wife around her shoulders, then continued to interpret and explain the show while he pulled her body into an embrace.

* * *

The early afternoon on the next day.

Queen Aura sat in front of the royal physician, Doctor Michelle, and quietly exposed her voluminous chest to a great extent.

“Excuse me, Your Highness. Do you feel anything when I press here?”

“Yes, it feels a bit strained.”

“And here?”

“No, nothing in particular.”

A voluptuous woman exposed her breasts and an older man felt up her body. On a glance, it looked rather lewd, but Aura was way too unashamed for it to be erotic and Doctor Michelle was simply focussed on his job.

Before long, Doctor Michelle finished his exanimation of Aura, nodded once and told her.

“Okay, Your Highness, you may cover up your front now.”

“Good. So, Doctor Michelle, did you discover anything?”

Aura asked that while she retied the shoulder straps of her dress, whereat Doctor Michelle mused for a while with a wrinkle between his greyed eyebrows, then answered her question.

“Your Highness, please let me confirm one last thing. You said that at first your body felt weak like due to a small fever when you woke up, right?

“Indeed. Also, when I stand up from a chair, my vision gets blurry.”

“Have you experienced any change in your senses of smell or taste in the last few days?”

“Yes. The fish tasted rather crude and I excessively ate a flavourful food that I am usually not fond of.”

“And what is more, you feel some strain in your abdomen.”

“Yes, though I was not aware of it until your exanimation.”

“Moreover, your ‘menstruation’ is already two month late.”

“Yes, but my ‘menstruation’ has always been irregular. During the war, it even had been late for half a year once.”

Aura’s eyes, looking at Doctor Michelle, were filled with a certain hope as she answered.

At first, she had suspected that she was under the weather and called for Doctor Michelle, but considering his question, she could more or less guess what he was going to say.

Pregnant.

This aged physician considered that the reason for Aura’s qualm.

And thinking about it, it was more than reasonable. It had been a couple of month since Aura shared the bed with Zenjirou. It would be by no means strange for her to show symptoms of a pregnancy.

As the last survivor of the royal family, Aura had the obligation to bear a child to continue her bloodline, but it had been her wish in equal measure, too.

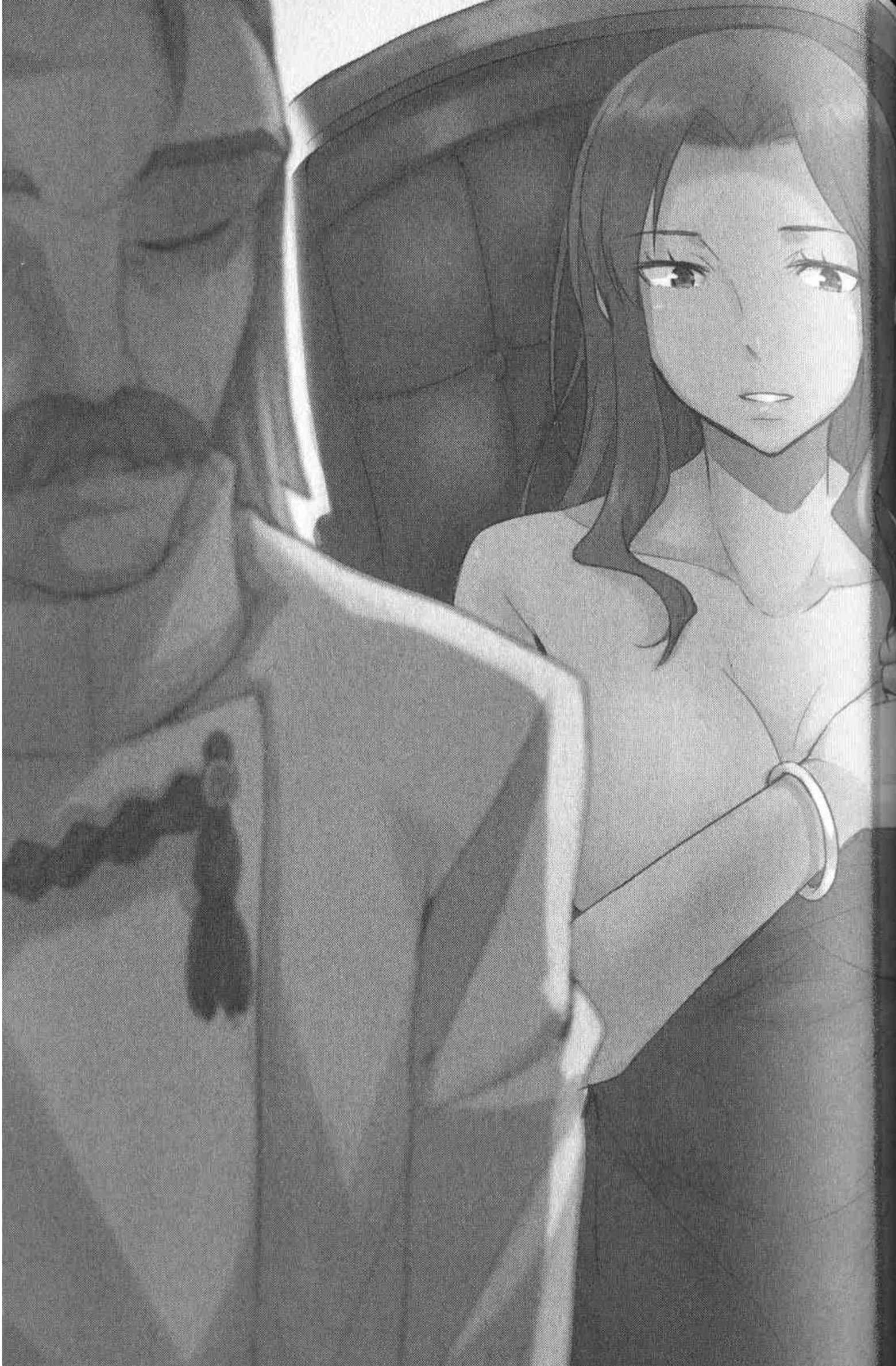
“So, how is it, Doctor Michelle?”

Aura leaned forward on the chair and waited for the old physician’s words.

Doctor Michelle cleared his throat with a cough, then presented his conclusion.

“I cannot be all too sure just yet, but as far as I see it, it is quite likely that you are pregnant. Still, when you are indeed pregnant, please be careful from now on as you are getting into the period with the highest chance of a miscarriage.”

It was difficult to specify a pregnancy in this world without a pregnancy test, unless the stomach stood out. Especially for women like Aura, who had an irregular menstruation.



The aged physician didn't assert it, but his words had some conviction in them, so Aura showed a bright smile.

"Oho, I see! But to think that the change in my sense of taste sprang from the pregnancy. I had thought for sure that one would crave for fruits during a pregnancy."

"That is only the most common manifestation. In reality, it varies for each person. In your case, Your Highness, you crave for some flavourful food while others may have a desire for sweet things.

In the worst case, one may even be thirsting for alcohol and the most unmanageable type 'does not want to eat anything', combined with the morning sickness that comes later."

"Then I take it that I should refrain from alcohol during the pregnancy?"

Aura loved alcohol, even without an exceptional appetite, so she inquired while slightly twisting the mouth.

Doctor Michelle distorted his gentle face upon her words and opened his mouth.

"That goes without saying. There are a lot of other things you have to take heed of, too. In the first place, the amount of alcohol you usually imbibe is a bit…"

"Yes, yes. It is for my child, so I will not talk back. Just say the word."

Aura showed the frowning physician a wry smile and raised both her arms in defeat.

* * *

"Eh, pregnant!? Really?"

At night of the same day, Zenjirou heard the news about his wife's pregnancy from her and reacted with surprise.

He literally jumped up from the couch, rushed towards Aura, who still stood at the entrance of the room, and inspected her stomach from a short distance.

Still smiling happily, Aura caressed her own stomach with her right hand while slowly heading towards the couch.

"Well, it is not certain yet. Just the probability for it is high. My 'menstruation' is rather irregular, so not even Doctor Michelle could make a definite statement. Naturally, I will act with the assumption from now on that there is a child in my stomach, seeing as the probability is high. I believe it will cause you some inconveniences as well, but I ask for your help."

"O- Of course. Yeah, I'll do anything I can."

Zenjirou answered Aura as she sat down on the couch, but like most males in this situation, it still didn't feel real to him that he would become a father and he moved about in confusion.

Normally he would sit down next to Aura with a nonchalant face, but now he sat down on the opposite couch with a meek expression.

Until yesterday, he had embraced her shoulders and pushed her down on the bed like it was nothing, but suddenly the body of his wife seemed like a fragile object.

Aura smiled a bit upon the obvious agitation her husband showed, but didn't urge him to sit beside her like usually.

When all is said and done, it was a first experience for Aura, too. Their individual feelings might not be comparable, but she was possibly more nervous than him.

"Well, to be honest, I have no idea what we are supposed to do, so I cannot tell you to do anything at this point."

"Ah, right, okay. Mhm, a baby, huh."

He had been prepared. To begin with, the main reason Aura summoned him from a different world to take him as her husband was to "preserve the bloodline", so it would have been weird instead if he hadn't been prepared. Still, now that it had come to it, he was stricken with a shock that was difficult to put into words.

It was an overwhelming feeling like the joy and worry weighted on him like a pressure. A tension that made him want to run away, even though there was no way that he wasn't happy about it.

Zenjirou tightly joined his hands together on his lap and noticed that his fingertips had gone completely cold and stiff from the tension.

He rubbed the palms of his hands together as to warm up his tensed fingertips while he asked a relevant question to disguise his tension.

"But in that case, I guess it would be bad to sleep together from tonight on. Of course we'll have to postpone the night activities, but before that, I don't have such a good sleeping posture."

The bed they usually slept in was ridiculous huge with a size bigger than a one-room mansion in downtown, but they slept in the middle of it while embracing each other.

He had already found his arms or legs on Aura's body on several occasions when he woke up in the morning. A leg/arm or two on top of her wouldn't increase the likeliness of a miscarriage so easily, but even if there was only a one percent chance, he ought to avoid it.

Aura had kept smiling the whole time, but on Zenjirou's argument her face twitched.

The smile vanished form her face and a serious expression took its place. She correct her posture and slowly opened her mouth.

"Right. Doctor Michelle also said it would certainly pose a remote danger to share the bed now that I am under the suspicion of being pregnant."

Aura's tone as she said that, showed a slight hint of sounding out her husband's attitude, but it was just too weak for Zenjirou to notice it as he was currently out of it due to tension and surprise.

"Then we can't afford to sleep together. Tonight we've no other choice but to sleep in separate rooms and tomorrow, we'll have them add another bed to our bedroom during the day. Then I'll sleep on that one from tomorrow on."

The husband proposed a rearrangement of their bedroom, so that he could sleep in the same room as his wife now that it was likely that she was pregnant and they couldn't copulate anymore.

The suggestion sounded very attractive to the wife, but Aura was a Queen before a wife, so she couldn't agree to it right away.

"Are you really fine with that?"

She asked him while keeping her serious expression.

"Eh?"

Zenjirou couldn't comprehend the meaning behind her question and made a dumbfounded utterance.

Aura observed the face of her husband, which was bathed in the white light of the LED floor lamps, with sharp attention to see through any lie and asked with more direct words this time.

"When you still let me into the bedroom while I am pregnant, it would mean that you cannot invite 'other women' into the bedroom, you know?"

Even Zenjirou's brain, which wasn't fully working right now, could understand such clear words.

In short, Aura implied the possibility that Zenjirou would lay hands on other women while she was pregnant.

(Oh, right. I'm technically royalty, so it normally wouldn't be strange for me to have other wives besides Aura, I guess)

He had learned in the last few months that very few males amongst royalty have had only one wife.

So far, no one had disturbed their happy married life, since the absolute duty to have a "legitimate heir of royal blood" with Aura was pending, but when the crucial factor, namely Aura, was already pregnant and he couldn't sleep with her anymore, then other women would definitely make a move— or more precisely, influential nobles would send out women.

Zenjirou, realising his own situation, openly frowned, then replied with a tone that sounded like he would click his tongue any moment.

“I’m not such a good-for-nothing that I would run off to another woman as soon as my own wife is pregnant with my child. Actually, I don’t think I’ll have the time to think about anything but you and the child until you’ve safely given birth.”

His statement was slightly exaggerated, but true to eighty percent. Right now might be one thing, but it certainly was going too far to say that he would worry about Aura’s well-being the whole long time until she gave birth, but in the unlikely event that he accepted a concubine, Aura’s face would definitely pop up in his head if he were to share the bed with the concubine.

At this point, this was nothing but a speculation, but one he would vouch for.

His words sounded a bit like a passionate confession of love, so Aura stopped her cheeks from blushing with her willpower and replied while still keeping a serious expression.

“However, the problem at hand is that the important nobles will definitely make a move as soon as my pregnancy is confirmed and announced publicly. It is more reasonable for them to do so than for you to refuse in this case.”

“Well, I guess… but Aura, you told me to be a bit more selfish, right? Will you accept it as my selfishness when I say that ‘I don’t want that’?”

Her husband had always considered her standpoint and never been selfish to an extent, where it was irritating, but he named his first selfishness now. Aura would’ve never anticipated that it would be in regards to “denying a concubine”.

She felt a joy that heated up her body to the bone and didn’t even hide her surprise.

“To think you would go so far. Are you that against it?”

Zenjirou sat down on the black leather couch again, then looked straight into Aura’s eyes and nodded.

“Yes. If I had to choose between like and dislike, I would say dislike. And If I had to choose between like, dislike or neither, I would still say dislike.

Well, I’m aware that I’ve to fulfil my role as royalty once I married you, so I’ll do my best to somehow accept one if it puts you or the country at a disadvantage when I refuse, but… to be honest, I’m not confident that I can pull it off.”

“Mhm, I never knew you were this upright.”

Zenjirou showed a wry smile on Aura’s evaluation and denied it with a wave of his hand in front of his face.

“Nah, it got nothing to do with being upright. For example, I once had a girlfriend for roughly a year. If you had summoned me for marriage during that time, I would’ve probably dumped her for you without a second thought.

I might have even resorted to adultery if it were possible to freely move between our worlds. So I’m not really upright. Just like I said before, it’s just my selfishness.

I would just hate it when the long-awaited relationship with my lovely wife turns awkward because an outsider makes a woman I don’t love barge in between.”

“Hardly probable that it will become awkward. I certainly will not be pleased when you sleep with another woman, but I know my place as royalty enough as not to express it.”

Aura unexpectedly objected like that, whereat Zenjirou replied with a sullen face.

“It would be awkward for me. I’m not so impudent as to have an affair at night and ask my pregnant wife ‘how’s our child?’ during the day.”

“Hmm…”

Aura was at a loss for words.

His strong opposition was beyond her expectation. Or rather, she didn’t expect him to oppose the idea to begin with. Rejecting a concubine under normal circumstances was already arguable, but to do the same while the legal wife was pregnant made you quite an oddball amongst direct royalty.

(Oh… Before I knew it, I expected my husband, a commoner from a different world, to have the same values as nobles in our world)

As that thought crossed her mind, Aura realized once again now that her husband was not from a typical lineage.

In a way, she had been “spoilt“ by him.

She had unconsciously reckoned that her husband comprehends her position and accepts her suggestions without needing any detailed explanations or persuasions, so she couldn’t deny it if she were to be called “spoilt”.

(Not good. I told him to be more selfish, but in my mind, I took it for “granted” that he would not be selfish…)

Aura closed her eyes in self-reflection and made a small sigh.

It came in an unexpected way, but her husband mentioned his first selfishness. She wanted to comply with it, if possible. Moreover, it concerned the “refusal of a concubine”, so naturally, Aura gladly wanted to grant that “selfishness” on an emotional level, too.

However, what did reality look like? Was pushing aside a concubine here still considered a permitted selfishness, rationally considering the current relationship between the royal family and the important nobility?

In the worst case, it would be misunderstood as Aura’s selfishness instead of Zenjirou’s.

And the likeliness of that was rather high. In view of their respective positions, it was more natural that Aura was the one rejecting the concubine.

The criticism wouldn’t be fatal, if others were come to the wrong conclusion that Aura ignored her husband’s will and rejected the concubine, but quite painful nevertheless.

Before long, Aura opened her eyes and declared with a calm tone.

“Fine. I will try my best to have it settled in accordance with your will. I promise you. However, I am the Queen. Although it is a familial promise, I will have to break it if brings about a large disadvantage to my country that I cannot ignore.

Be prepared for that… and forgive me.”

Aura lowered her head a bit with a serious face, whereupon Zenjirou showed her his usual gentle smile for the first time today.

“…I get it. You don’t have to take it so serious. I’m well aware of my own position. And you know, it might affect the child if you’re feeling down.”

Aura raised her head as he spoke and relaxed her expression on his words.

“Yes, you are right. Well then, we are pressed for time, so shall we call it a day now?”

Saying so, she stood up from the couch.

Zenjirou tilted his head puzzled for a moment, but then realized right away what Aura was getting at. They had decided not to sleep in the same bed. As it was too late now to prepare another bed in the bedroom, there was no other way but to sleep in a different room than Aura tonight.

The words “one more night in the same bed wouldn’t hurt” were on the tip of his tongue, but Zenjirou forcibly swallowed them down and stood up.

Zenjirou was given only one great responsibility, namely to let Aura bear a healthy child. By no means could he afford to spoil that of all things.

“Okay. Be careful. Try to keep your stomach warm.”

“I know. Doctor Michelle gave me a long speech already, too. No alcohol, no long baths, never bathing alone and watching out for my sleeping posture. If it turns out that I am not pregnant after all these restrictions, I will not able to stand for a while because I feel so drained.”

“Ahaha. It just shows how important you and that baby are.”

While exchanging words like that, Aura moved to in front of the exit of the room, being seen off by Zenjirou.

The six LED floor lamps were placed around the main living area, namely the center of the room, so the space, where she was standing, was gloomy.

“Well then.”

Amidst this gloominess, Aura faced her husband one more time before grabbing the door knob and twined her arms around his neck.

“Yeah, good night.”

Zenjirou accepted the embrace without protest and put his hands on his wife’s back and waist, then pulled her voluptuous brown body closer and kissed her lightly.

“Mm…”

“Mm… Mmm… Good night.”

After they exchange a kiss and an embrace to feel each other’s warmth, Aura left the room with a regretful smile.

* * *

After wishing her husband a good night, the Queen headed not to a different bedroom, but to a room in the palace.

“Welcome back, Your Highness. How did it go?”

The middle-aged man with a slender face, standing in the dark room, asked and bowed respectfully.

“So dark here. Make some more light.”

Aura said with a casual tone, then lowered her bottom onto the chair made of vines as energetic as always, but stopped midday as she suddenly came to a realisation and sat down with care.

“Yes, please give me a moment.”

Secretary Fabio used the fire of an oil pan to lit the candles on the candle stands while Aura leaned back and started to talk with her eyes still upturned.

“For now, I told my husband about my possible pregnancy and the implicated matter of a concubine later on. But he mentioned an unexpected ‘selfishness’.”

“Oho? How rare. What did he say?”

“Well, it is nothing complicated. To get to the point, my husband does not want to take a concubine if possible. His reason is…”

Aura then let her secretary, who warily narrowed his eyes to slits, in on the earlier conversation with her husband with a carefree tone.

“I see now. In other words, he would rather share the bedroom with Your Highness, whom he cannot sleep with, than to sleep with a concubine. Oh my, you sure are loved, Your Highness.”

After her secretary had heard the story from beginning to end, he directed slightly teasing words at his master.

“Yes. Thanks to that, I am blessed with the happiest married life ever. Still, for that very reason, I have to reflect on myself now. It appears that I took my ‘sympathetic husband’ for far too granted.”

“Certainly. I should never have imagined it possible that Zenjirou-sama’s ‘selfishness’ would take such a shape. In fact, I, too, have started to become accustomed to his understanding personality.”

The secretary assumed a poker face and assented to Aura’s words with a small nod.

“But to think a man would love you so much that he unquestioningly sees a concubine only as a hindrance.”

“Fabio, if you have something to say, say it outright.”

Then Queen glared up to him from her chair with half-opened eyes, whereat her secretary shrugged his shoulders curtly while still standing attention, and answered.

"No, I was just thinking 'every man to his taste', but without any malice."

"…That could hardly be any worse. You are definitely being rude there, Fabio."

"Oh? Then do you consider yourself to be the right stuff that men love?"

"Grr…"

Aura showed a fierce expression of anger to her secretary's affected question, but had troubles to object.

The Carpa Kingdom was a patriarchic society that strongly tended to androcentrism, so a pushy woman like Aura wasn't all that liked, no matter how beautiful and well-proportioned.

Aura herself was aware of that. Of course she wasn't dissatisfied with her appearance or character, but when she compared herself to an ideal "woman loved by men" like Lady Octavia, she started to have some doubts.

Aura sensed that she was at a disadvantage, so she cleared her throat with a cough and got back on topic.

"Well, anyway, this incident was a real eye-opener to me because it seems that I have overvalued my husband a bit, too.

As he has said himself, he is of common birth. His knowledge and perception allow him to understand the values and lifestyle of royalty and nobility. Furthermore, he possess a reasoning and tolerance that lets him adapt to these values. Due to that, I unconsciously ended up misunderstanding him, but the values rooted in his personality greatly differ from ours."

"So it seems. Though royalty and nobility, respectively have to accept something like a concubine as 'ordinary'."

To begin with, perceiving the fact that a direct royalty took a concubine, as an "affair" was fundamentally out of place. A concubine was a respectable secondary "wife". Nobody in his senses would call the relationship with his wife an affair.

"It would be pretentious to expect that from my husband. He is already so very sympathetic and fully understands my position. We never expected a husband that would wholly conduct himself according to our wishes from the beginning, did we?"

Her secretary complied with her.

"Indeed. However, the refusal of a concubine will not come across as a selfishness from Zenjirou-sama at this point. It will be understood as your selfishness, saying that the Queen keeps other women away from Zenjirou-sama out of jealousy at best."

"I… know that."

Secretary Fabio had struck a nerve, so Aura pressed onto her temples with the thumb and middle finger of her right hand and made a big sigh.

The bad reputation of "not respecting one's husband" was so harmful in the Carpa Kingdom that it couldn't be ignored. As the Queen, Aura had to prevent that from happening at all costs.

"If you want to grant his selfishness no matter what, then it is necessary that Zenjirou-sama puts himself on the line to a certain extent and actively takes the blame for it."

In other words, he claimed that Zenjirou ought to appear more in the higher society from now on and declare from his own mouth how madly in love he was with Aura and how he had no interest in other women.

It was the same as telling Zenjirou to ruin his reputation to protect Aura's.

"…So in the end, it will cause troubles for my husband."

Aura grimaced, whereat her secretary replied with cold words while remaining inexpressive.

"We are hogtied. Rumours about your pregnancy are already spreading within the palace. When you turn down all of the requested audiences from the important nobles right now, it comes with an adequate price."

Aura clicked her tongue in reaction to Secretary Fabio's words.

“It has already spread that far?”

She had been prepared for it, but that was quick.

It surely showed how much attention everyone had giving the Queen’s pregnancy. When a legitimate heir was guaranteed, there was no longer a need to hesitate about sending in a concubine.

While Aura sighed yet again, Secretary Fabio broached a different topic as he suddenly thought of it.

“Oh, speaking of audiences, the royal knight Otario Maldonado requested a meeting with Zenjirou-sama.”

Aura raised the volume of her voice a bit surprised upon his words.

“Otario? I have not heard that name before. What does he want? My husband will not leave the inner palace, you know. I cannot allow a man to meet him unless it is something quite important.”

“It seems he wants to directly express his gratitude for receiving the ‘dragon bow’ from Zenjirou-sama and pledge his loyalty anew on this occasion.”

“Ah, I see. The one from the banquet.”

Aura recalled the circumstances and was convinced by its inevitableness.

General Puyol had tried to present Zenjirou a tribute in form of the “dragon bow”. Zenjirou had brought the matter to a quick close with the words “pass that ‘dragon bow’ to your knight, who is the most able with the bow and the most loyal to the royal family”.

The general must have passed on the “dragon bow” to a promising knight like he was told.

Five “dragon bows” were worth as much as a single battle raptorial dragon and it was only natural that the knight wanted to thank Zenjirou for receiving one of it.

“So, is that knight called Ontario a problematic one? Zenjirou ordered for it to be handed to the one with the greatest ‘loyalty to the royal family’, you know.”

If his “loyalty” wasn’t directed at the royal family, but General Puyol instead, she would never allow a meeting.

Her secretary denied the question she had asked with strained shoulders.

“No, General Puyol must have born that in mind, too. Knight Otario is from the Maldonado Family, which has a low status, but is known for their long loyalty towards the royal family. He himself is a person of extreme good conduct and there are no problems with him.

Well, it seems he is in favour with General Puyol, seeing as he received the ‘dragon bow’ from him, but I doubt he is swayed that easily.”

“Still, that sounds like there is more to it? Although Knight Otario himself is not problematic, someone around him is?”

The secretary consented unaffected to her words.

“Yes. Very perceptive of you. Knight Otario has a little sister in a marriageable age. Her name is Kate. There are no problems with her personality either. She is quite beautiful, wise and just as loyal to the royal family as her brother. However, the problem with her is that she serves Zenjirou-sama in the inner palace.”

“…..”

Even Aura was at her wits’ end on that answer.

The secretary nonchalantly gave his master, who showed an expression like suppressing a sour face, the final blow.

“I have heard that Zenjirou-sama interacts rather friendly with the waiting maids in the inner palace. So the little sister will surly convey the gratitude for the ‘dragon bow’ of her brother. I just hope they do not get too close to each other.”

General Puyol’s aim was as transparent as ever.

A royal knight extremely loyal to the royal family and his little sister, likewise extremely loyal to the royal family and working in the inner palace. When he brought over the knight to his side and succeeded in getting

the sister closer to Zenjirou, he would've established a connection to the royal family, albeit in a roundabout way.

"…Where is Knight Otario stationed?"

"Previously he served in the guard troops of the capital, but his transfer to the Dragonback Archery Knights under the direct command of General Puyal has been determined."

The words from her secretary were exactly what Aura had expected. The knight with the borrowed "dragon bow" was transferred to the elite unit "Dragonback Archery Knights". At least on the surface, it embodied no problem at all.

Needless to say, in the shadow lurked General Puyol's obvious intention to win Otario over for his faction.

"That means he gave up on his ambition to make his little sister a concubine for my husband?"

"No, the General himself wishes an audience with you, so I believe it is unlikely he has given up. My guess is that he intents to pursue two plans at the same time."

"The man is as transparent as ever…"

In the last few months, he had worriedly spoken to Aura about the reorganisation of the royal army and the armies of the feudal lords quite often, so she had thought that he settled down, but the ambitions of the "Insatiable Wolf" were as strong as ever.

"Good grief, what a pain."

"My sincerest condolences."

The secretary said that to the sighing Queen with a tone void of any feelings, then bowed courteous.

Chapter 04: The confidential Message from the Twin Kingdom

One month later. Aura's pregnancy turned out to be proper.

Her stomach still didn't stand out yet, but she suddenly showed the unique symptoms for the initial stage of a pregnancy and her menstruation was more than three months late, so Doctor Michelle had verified the pregnancy with conviction.

The Queen was pregnant. Naturally, these big news stirred the Carpa Palace up.

Some people already requested an audience with the Queen to give presents to mark the occasion of the pregnancy. Others indirectly put in a good word for a concubine candidate for Zenjirou on the same occasion.

Moreover, influential nobles made a list of people from their own faction, who were currently breastfeeding a baby or had a big belly and were close to give birth, so they could be appointed as the wet nurse for the child of the Queen.

The "wet nurse", who, as the name implied, breastfeed instead of the Queen, and the "nanny", who was responsible for the upbringing after the breastfeeding period, were often different people, so a decision at this point was nothing definitive, but the influence of a wet nurse or foster sibling on the growing next ruler wasn't to be underestimated.

The inner palace was a shielded space and normally it was rarely influenced by the outside, but the news this time originated from it, so it couldn't stay out of it. Due to that, Zenjirou, too, had no piece of mind in the last month and spent hectic days.

"Aw, there really is no useful information. What a flop."

The sunlight recently had gotten gentler bit by bit and now shone through the opened windows into the room of the inner palace, where Zenjirou had faced his computer the whole time and now leaked a dejected sigh after stretching his body and craning his neck once.

Ever since Aura told him about her possible pregnancy, he had looked through his whole data storage numerous times, so he knew that he wouldn't find anything new now, but he couldn't help checking again when he had free time. That was how much he regretted his insufficient preparation back in the days.

"Aw, damn. Why did I only consider the time after birth back then?"

No use crying over spilt milk. Although he did understand it in his head, he couldn't stop himself from grumbling.

Zenjirou came to this world with the original duty to make a child. And he had believed that he had prepared adequately for that.

Baby bottles, freezer Tupperware for breast milk and a few packs of milk powder just in case. Additionally, he also prepared a few sets of cute baby clothes and bought some books on child-rearing with titles such as "Papa's guide to raising a child" or "What a father can do" at the bookstore.

However, all these items or information served the purpose after the baby was born safely and were completely useless to help his wife during her pregnancy.

"Raising the child aside, I unconsciously considered the birth not my business."

Zenjirou hung his head dejected in front of the computer as he said that self-reprimanding.

Or more precisely, he actually lacked an awareness for possible dangers for the mother and child instead of considering the pregnancy or birth "none of his business".

That was nothing uncommon for a young, unmarried Japanese male.

Nowadays, cases, where the mother's life was in danger at birth, were rapidly decreasing in Japan.

The mortality rate for a mother during a pregnancy or delivery was around 0,005 percent in modern Japan. That meant only five women out of a hundred thousand. An even lower rate than for being run over by a truck in Tokyo.

However, even on modern Earth were developing countries without proper facilities or hygienic environments, where the mortality rate for mothers was still close to five percent. In other words, one out of twenty mothers died.

Fortunately, the hygiene and medical skills in the Carpa Kingdom weren't that backward, but even so, it wasn't all that unusual that a mother of commonalty couldn't endure the delivery and lost her life.

Needless to say, Aura had the best physicians in the country around her as the Queen and she herself was quite healthy and full of vitality and stamina. Doctor Michelle had assured that it was "extremely unlikely", but Zenjirou still ended up imagining the worst case.

"It could all be settled at once if we were to call someone of the Jilbell family from the Twin Kingdom, though."

The medical technology in this world was several stages behind the one in modern Japan, but the "healing magic" from the Jilbell lineage was an exception.

The Jilbell family could heal wounds, restore stamina or ease mental fatigue with the supernatural power called magic and with one of them by your side, there was nothing to be afraid of. A safe delivery would be even more guaranteed than in modern Japan.

However, even as the major power ruling over the western part of the South Continent, the Carpa Kingdom had hardly any chance to keep a person from the Jilbell lineage around for the whole time of the pregnancy.

The delivery was still more than half a year away. The Jilbell Family would never sign such a long-term contract, where they diligently watched over the royalty's well-being and the danger of a miscarriage.

Then he wanted at least to immediately call over someone from the pope lineage when Aura's condition took a sudden turn for the worse. That was wishful thinking, since the fastest method of transport in this world was a raptorial dragon, but the Carpa Kingdom actually had an exceptional way to make that wishful thinking reality.

"If only someone beside Aura could use the teleportation magic, then we would be out of the woods."

Zenjirou grumbled for the nth time.

For the royalty of Carpa, the obstacle of distance originally meant nothing as they could use "Space-Time Magic". With the teleportation magic, they could travel to everywhere on the continent in an instant.

However, Aura was currently the only one left, who could use the space-time magic.

The summoned healer would be for Aura, when her condition precipitated, so she would be in no state to perform a large magic like the teleportation.

"So it's technically my role. I've to learn the space-time magic."

Apparently, Zenjirou had enough disposition to be able to use space-time magic, albeit a latent one at best.

However, he had only started to learn magic for a few month. It usually required an average of three years of training to be able to use magic.

Although Lady Octavia, his magic teacher, had said that this number of three years could change drastically based on individual talent, environment or more training hours per day, it obviously didn't mean that he could cut the three years short to one or half a year because of it.

It barely referred to reducing it to two years and ten months or two and a half years in very capable cases. With all due respect, it was impossible that Zenjirou would learn to use the space-time magic until Aura gave birth.

"But that doesn't mean I can neglect my magic studies. To begin with, it isn't necessarily her only pregnancy."

Turning off the computer with a click on the mouse, Zenjirou lightly slapped his cheeks to refresh his mood and stood up from the chair fitfully.

“I would like to take more magic lessons, but it definitely would raise suspicion when I meet more often with Octavia-san while Aura’s pregnant. Maybe I should get an old woman as a teacher to avoid rumours or in the worst case, leave the inner palace in search for a male teacher.”

So far, Zenjirou had enjoyed a shut-in lifestyle under the nominal cover of preserving Aura’s power, but if it was to protect the lives of Aura and their child, he was prepared to accept a few inconveniences and leave the inner palace.

Speaking of, he was supposed to leave the inner palace for a short period to meet the knight, whom he had borrowed the “dragon bow” to, currently postponed due to the turmoil of Aura’s pregnancy.

He might be able to get a slight idea about what troubles await him when he leaves the inner palace.

“Perhaps I should take Aura’s place for public events, which don’t require difficult decisions, until she reached the stable period?”

As Zenjirou mused about the future in front of the computer, he suddenly put a thought into words.

In the patriarchal Carpa Kingdom, Aura’s authority would be undermined when Zenjirou substituted for her. That was an undeniable fact, but it would be mistaking the cause for the end when Aura endangered herself and the child by forcing herself to attend such events.

The point is, Zenjirou would just have to be careful and behave like a well-mannered doll.

“I should put some serious thought into it.”

Determined at heart in various ways, Zenjirou arranged the things he could and must do, in his head until it was time for his lesson with Octavia.

* * *

“…This is certainly not a pleasant feeling.”

Around the same time. Aura had interrupted her duties as a nausea had suddenly gotten the better of her and she breathed words that were close a whimper on a rare occasion.

She showed a symptom from the early stage of her pregnancy, namely “morning sickness”. When the words of Doctor Michelle could be trusted, the worst stage of the morning sickness would soon be over, but she could hardly wait for that day to arrive.

“And here I thought I learned to suppress the urge to vomit on the battlefield…”

“Well, I guess it means that the fleeting impulse to throw up from a mental stimulation cannot be grouped together with the ongoing sick feeling from morning sickness.”

“Yes, I was painfully made aware of that… Though I am able to live without that kind of information.”

Still sitting on her chair, Aura raised her head from the vat, then glared up to Secretary Fabio, standing next to her, and replied with that.

Normally she brushed off the blunt way of speaking from her secretary without problems, but now she felt like snapping at each and every remark of his. She now could understand Zenjirou’s sentiment of wanting to be alone when sick. It was quite an ordeal to hide her heightened aggressivity, originating from her bad condition, from others.

In that way, Secretary Fabio’s existence was a godsend to her.

The middle-aged secretary was generous and loyal enough to simply endure some abusive language from her and usually didn’t mince his words either, so she would’ve enough reason to complain about him instead if she wanted to.

After she had safely given birth, she ought to somehow express her gratitude and make amends to him, but for now it should be alright to presume upon his loyalty for a bit.

“…..Fuh.”

She rinsed her mouth with water from a silver goblet, then spat it into the vat and comfortably leaned back into her chair in a somewhat calmer state.

“So, what is the next matter?”

The Queen refocused on her duties, whereat her secretary resumed the conversation without giving her any considerate words like “are you sure you do not want to rest a bit longer?”.

“Very well. The letter from the envoy from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell.”

“Oh, that one.”

Aura tightly shut her eyes and shook her head a few times to get a clear head when her secretary answered.

Originally it wouldn’t be strange for Aura to welcome an official envoy from the Twin Kingdom in the audience chamber herself, but as she was currently in poor physical health due to the pregnancy, she avoided public appearances as much as possible.

“I presume it is about the request to turn the rings I handed to Princess Isabelle, into magic tools. I shall read it.”

“Yes, here.”

With these words, Aura held out her hand, into which her secretary smoothly put the letter he pulled out of his pocket.

“Mh? This crest belongs to the Sharrow Royal Family?”

The crest on the envelope wasn’t from Princess Isabelle’s Jilbell Royal Family, but from the Sharrow Royal Family. Aura showed a slightly bewildered expression upon noticing that and tilted her head puzzled.

However, it wasn’t unusual that the letter came directly from the Sharrow Royal Family, considering that they would actually process the rings, even if she had told her request to Princess Isabelle from the Jilbell Family.

Convinced by that, Aura took a plain bronze dagger out of the drawer of her desk and opened the seal on the letter with it.

“Hmm…”

She calmly read through it, as the content at the beginning was just like she had expected, but suddenly widened her eyes when she reached a certain point of the letter.

“!?”

“Your Highness?”

Aura had been on the point of jumping up from her chair, so her secretary, surprised on a rare occasion, swiftly acted to support her.

“…It is okay. Nothing serious.”

Aura replied with that to Secretary Fabio, but contrary to her words, the blood had drained from her face and her complexion now looked bluish black.

“Hah.”

She clearly wasn't okay, but the secretary obediently retreated as he decided to observe his master's attitude for now.

Before long, Aura finished reading the letter and took three deep breaths.

Her complexion was still kind of bluish, but judging by her expression, she seemed to have calm down a bit.

As Secretary Fabio had waited for the right time, he now called out to the Queen cautiously.

"Your Highness, may I ask about the content of the letter?"

Unlike domestic "messages from small flying dragons", this letter was a diplomatic document from one royalty to another. Fabio was nothing but a simple secretary, so he had no right to read such a document.

After Aura took another deep breath upon her secretary's question, she slowly began to talk with an expression that suppressed some kind of fury.

"It mainly contains what I already expected: Princess Isabelle's gratitude about sending her off with my magic and the notification that my request for turning the rings into magic tool has been accepted."

The faithful secretary silently listened to Aura's words, signifying her to continue.

The content had agitated Queen Aura to such an extent. Even Fabio, whose trade mark was his iron mask-like poker face, started to sweat on the hands, which he had unconsciously squeezed into fists.

"The problem is the 'gossip' that is embedded into it like small talk. You see, the rumour is about one princess born into the Sharrow Family."

"A princess from the Sharrow Family? Including the branch family, there is quite a number of them, but I think the fifty-years old Princess Caroline is the oldest one from the direct descendants."

"No, not in the world today. It is about the princess that was erased from the official records roughly a hundred and fifty years ago."

"A hundred and fifty years ago…"

The iron mask of Secretary Fabio twitched upon her words.

One hundred and fifty years ago. The erased existence of royalty. On top of that, a woman.

At this point, Secretary Fabio had an exact idea about whom that story was about and to "whom" it connected. He licked once over his dry lips and waited for Aura to continue.

"Since it has completely been erased from the official records, this seems to be a rumour at best, but apparently the Princess, a direct descendent of the Sharrow Family, fell in love with a man she would never be allowed to marry in reality.

Some say the man of her affection was a mere commoner, others say he was from the 'royalty of hostile country at that time'.

And as love sprouted between two people, who were never allowed to marry, they turned towards elopement before long. In the end, it says, they travelled to a 'new land, where no one would ever find them'."

Aura finished the tale by nearly spitting out the last bit with raping talking as if she had became desperate.

The secretary took a few deep breaths like Aura before. Indeed, this were certainly extremely bad news, which warranted an agitation.

Even so, Secretary Fabio had more of his composure left than Aura, as he himself wasn't related to it, and uttered his considered opinion without a crack in his voice.

"So the partner for the 'prince, who eloped into a different world one hundred and fifty years ago' in the myth of our Carpa Kingdom, was the Princess from the Sharrow Family. In other words, Zenjirou-sama has inherited both the Carpa bloodline and the Sharrow bloodline, I wonder?"

Aura shook her pale head wearily to the words of her secretary.

"Maybe? Maybe not? No one knows the truth. But it seems that the sender of this letter considers it to be true."

Aura wrinkled her nose displeased and wildly threw the letter in her hand onto the table. The content was extremely unsettling, but she perfectly understood the importance of it nevertheless.

In this world, being royalty equalled having a unique magic in its bloodline.

Due to that, cases, where royalty of one country married into royalty of a different country just like in mediaeval Europe on Earth, practically never happened. The Carpa Kingdom, for example, had clearly written down a prohibition to marry foreigners for people, who had a relative of the first or second degree that could use "Space-Time Magic".

The royalty with their bloodline magic belonged to its country and amounted to its military strength if necessary. Now considering that it would fall into the hands of foreign royalty, it was understandable to lose your cool.

"But does that letter really state the truth? What is the chance that they took advantage of a myth from us and sent the letter with the aim to stir up our country?"

Aura shook her head amused in response to her secretary's prudent argument.

"I cannot deny that possibility, but the messenger arrived too late for that. A whole month has passed, you know. Most likely, the messenger carefully delivered the letter with his own hands without relying on small flying dragons. If they had wanted to stir us up, it would have been more natural to use a small flying dragon."

With small flying dragons, the same message was sent a bunch of times and only one of them had to reach the destination. The downside was thus that the information could easily leak to an outsider. So when the aim was to stir things up through a rumour, there was no reason not to use the small flying dragons.

"I see. Then why do we not persist in denying all knowledge of that matter?"

Upon the secretary's bold suggestion, Aura awkwardly averted her gaze and answered.

"Impossible. My husband already ended up confessing it in front of Princess Isabelle during her sick bed visit that he is the descendant of the Carpa royalty, who eloped into a different world one hundred and fifty years ago."

On a rare occasion, her secretary was at a loss for words to her confession.

"That… was careless."

"It is all very well for you to talk. Back then, no one could have foreseen how precious that information is. Moreover, my husband had been sick at that point."

"I am aware of that, but it does not change the fact that it was careless."

Aura immediately defended Zenjirou, whereat her secretary coldly dismissed it with a sound argument. And after a bit of musing, he put the extremely unfavourable current state into words.

"In that case, the 'rumour' has a high credibility, much to our regret. Your Highness, Zenjirou-sama has inherited the Carpa blood without a doubt, correct?"

The secretary confirmed it now after all this time, whereupon Aura nodded while leaning against the backrest of her chair.

"Yes, that is for sure, because I added such a condition to the summoning spell. In addition, my husband has not all that much magic power as a royalty. He would not be able to use the 'Space-Time Magic' and 'Bestowal Magic' at the same time, not even by accident."

There was no precedent of a royalty having inherited two bloodline, so it couldn't be said with certainty, but an established theory at the present time didn't rule out the possibility that one person theoretically could use two bloodline magic. However, it required an amount of magic power twice as much as a royalty generally had, to make it possible.

"Then the Sharrow Family must fear the latent power in Zenjirou-sama's blood, namely the existence of this child."

Aura felt the gaze of her secretary on her stomach and unconsciously stroke it with the palm of right hand, answering him.

“Yes. But I doubt that my child will pose any danger to begin with. Even when we assume that my husband has inherited both the Carpa and the Sharrow blood, once it mixed with my strong Carpa blood, the Sharrow blood was surely suppressed anyway.”

Unless their child became an abnormality that was born with an exceptional magic power and could use both “Space-Time Magic” and “Bestowal Magic” without any problems, it would never cause any troubles. And even the Twin Kingdom surely didn’t anticipate such an unrealistic event.

Secretary Fabio expressed his consent to her words.

“Yes, I am of the same mind. However, it is a different matter altogether when Zenjirou-sama has a child with a concubine. The odds are that this child will manifest the blood of ‘Bestowal Magic’ instead of the blood of ‘Space-Time Magic’.”

“Certainly. I presume that is it what the Sharrow Family fears.”

The bloodline magic of royalty was a country’s best kept secret and if that were to leak to a different country, it was only natural that the members of the Sharrow Family would feel threatened. All the more in their case, since their bloodline magic was closely connected to their country’s defence and finances. If they were to lose their monopoly on magic tools, the Twin Kingdom’s earnings would plummet greatly, to put it charitably.

With one wrong step, the Twin Kingdom might resolve itself for a “next great war”.

“For now, we can only soothe the Twin Kingdom by hinting at them that my husband will not take any concubines.”

“Will that really appease them?”

Aura sighed in response to her secretary’s doubt and shook her head.

“I doubt it. I am sure they cannot rid themselves of the doubt that we will raise a user of ‘Bestowal Magic’ by having my husband secretly impregnate a woman and bring it up as someone else’s child even while we publicly announce that he takes no concubines.”

In fact, Aura herself might have resorted to that, if they weren‘t keeping track of Zenjirou. She knew how dangerous it was to anger the major power of the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, but the prospect of having the “Bestowal Magic” in the own country was so attractive that she wanted to grasp at it against her better judgement.

“Anyway, I think we should consider ourselves lucky that we avoided the worst timing here.”

“Indeed. If it had come to light before your pregnancy or after Zenjirou-sama had taken a concubine… To be honest, I do not even want to imagine it.”

Secretary Fabio answered her like that and shook his head with a stiff expression.

If these news had come to light before Aura was pregnant with Zenjirou’s child, the Twin Kingdom might have demanded more forcefully that Zenjirou was to be handed over to them.

On the other hand, if he already would have had a concubine, it was even possible that they suddenly started a war at once. Considering that, the current situation was far away from having the worst timing.

“Good grief. I would have never known about my husband’s lineage if not for this letter. If they are that afraid of fire, they should not have lit one in the first place.”

Aura glumly gave vent to her displeasure, whereat her secretary answered with a voice that had regained its full composure at some point.

“Most likely, they ‘did not know that we do not know the truth’. Or more precisely, they ‘had no concrete proof that we do not know it’. Maybe they came to the conclusion that it would be too late to act if we should ever stumble over the fact by chance and all they did was watch from the sidelines?”

“I guess that is the gist of it. Either way, I have to talk with my husband first. I am pregnant and the circumstances are a bit complicated after all. It would be better to assume that this will not work out peacefully while we keep it a secret from him.”

For a moment, Secretary Fabio looked like he wanted to say something, but didn't put it into words in the end.

"…Very well. Although it is a very important matter, it ultimately concerns Your Highness and Zenjirou-sama. I will entrust it to you."

"Yes, good."

Aura nodded firm and had all forgotten about her morning sickness at some point.

* * *

At night of the same day.

"…Due to that, the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, or rather the Sharrow Family cannot ignore your existence as you have inherited the bloodline of the Bestowal Magic. Forgive me for taking back my previous words, but I can no longer allow you to take a concubine because of this.

I am sorry. It will become boisterous around you for a while, but I want to ask for your assistance."

After dinner and bath, Aura sat across Zenjirou in the room of the inner palace and explained in detail what the letter from this noon said, what information they gathered from it and how they would cope with it.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the prince of the Carpa Kingdom eloped with a woman into a different world and the chance was high that this woman was a princess from the Sharrow Royal Family.

It seemed that Zenjirou did not only inherit the Carpa blood, but the Sharrow blood as well, as their descendant.

Therefore, it was possible that his children would have an aptitude for the Bestowal Magic, although Zenjirou himself showed an obvious aptitude for the Space-Time Magic.

Due to that, Zenjirou couldn't officially take any concubines for the time being, as not to provoke the Sharrow Family unnecessarily.

(Still, the Carpa blood of my child with Aura will apparently suppress the Sharrow blood, since her blood's stronger than mine, so it won't pose a problem)

Zenjirou put the information he had heard just now in order in his head without having a real grasp on it, then took the glass filled with water mixed with sugar and fruit sap, from the table while he was still slumped into the couch, and brought it to his mouth.

The moment he tilted the glass, the ice inside bounced around with a clatter and a water drops sprang from it onto his face.

"Uwah!?"

Zenjirou would usually never make such a childish blunder. Hearing about the secret of his birth must have agitated him more than he had thought.

"Are you okay, Zenjirou? It will hurt like hell when it gets into your eyes."

"Yeah, I'm fine. It was only my face."

On her outcall, Zenjirou took a white, gauze handkerchief out of the pocket of his trousers and wiped his face with an embarrassed expression.

Then he asked what weighted on his mind the most, what he wanted to know before anything else.

"But honestly, my existence can possibly become disadvantageous to the country then?"

The wife showed a reassuring smile on the frank question of her husband, and shook her head decisively.

"No. Your lineage may be a bit of a problem, but considering the situation in our country, it would be far more problematic if you leave. So there is no need to worry."

Zenjirou smiled bashful as he felt from her words that he made his wife be considerate to him unnecessarily.

"Yeah, okay. No worry, I wouldn't think about backing out or anything the like. I'm not such a self-sacrificing type.

It's just that I was thinking that some nobles would take all kind of actions if my existences ever brings a drawback to the country from an objective point of view."

Answering like that, Zenjirou shivered his body as his own imagination struck terror in his heart.

"Hmm…"

As his answer was a bit unexpected, Aura closed her mouth temporarily.

She mused a while over the thought process of her husband, which was more rational and severe than she had expected, then slowly opened her mouth.

"No, I would say you do not have to worry about that. For starters, the news that you have inherited the Sharrow blood is a classified information, only known to their and our royal family so far. But even if it should go public, the nobility in our country would hardly go head over heels to harm you.

Right now, I may be carrying a heir in my stomach, but you are one of the very few people from the Carpa lineage. That fact will not change. The drawbacks you might cause with your presence pale in comparison to the drawbacks of losing you."

In her mind she added: So realistically speaking, it is not the nobility of our Carpa Kingdom we need to worry about, but the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell.

At present, Zenjirou was undoubtedly a "hindrance" to the Sharrow Royal Family. The only one, who would profit from his disappearance, was none other than the Sharrow Family.

Therefore it was necessary to negotiate behind closed doors and convince the Sharrow Family that "Zenjirou wasn't such a hindrance that warranted to wage war to get rid of him".

Of course it was possible that some people in both the Carpa Kingdom and Twin Kingdom would take no account of such a logical argument and hurried to get rid of Zenjirou, but nothing would get started if even that had to be considered. These kind of dangers, difficult to anticipate, could only be dealt with makeshift.

After saying all that, Aura frowned a bit and continued.

"Anyhow, the fact that you have inherited the Sharrow blood is a classified information, just like I told you earlier. In other words, you must not mentioned anything about it when you turn down a concubine. Do you understand?"

Zenjirou faced the ceiling and mulled over Aura's question, then answered unconfident.

"Ehm, basically… I need a nominal 'excuse', different from the truth, to reject a concubine?"

Aura nodded curt once as his answer had apparently be correct.

"Indeed. But just like I told you before, it is rather unnatural for you to turn down a concubine in a political sense right now. To be honest, it will be quite difficult to come up with a reason that the nobles will accept.

So please forgive me for this, but can we say that the reason for turning down a concubine is your own selfishness?"

"My selfishness? What do you mean?"

Zenjirou tilted his head puzzled, whereat Aura averted her eyes a bit as her shyness won over her reasoning, and answered vaguely.

"You just have to proclaim the opinion you voiced when I told you about the concubine before, as it is. So, well… Like you do not want anyone to disturb our time alone. Or like you have your head full with the baby and cannot think about anything else…"

"Ah… AHH! G- Got it, yep."

Zenjirou couldn't hide his agitation either after hearing that. While he felt his own face getting hot, he replied flustered. Thinking back on it now, he said some really embarrassing stuff back then.

Not one word had been a lie, but the truth didn't make it any less embarrassing.

"….."

"….."

An uneasy silence hung over the married couple even now that had made a child.

Aura continued to talk with an affected loud voice as she couldn't stand the uneasiness of that silence.

"G- Good. Since we cannot reveal your lineage, there is no logical excuse the nobles will accept. In that case, the easiest way is to forcefully push through an argument based on your emotions.

…Forgive me. In the end, I am making you take the blame. Hereafter you will surely be labelled as a 'fool that underrates political decisions because he lost his head over a single woman'."

His wife lined up her knees and lowered her head a bit on top of the couch, whereupon Zenjirou stood up from the other couch wordlessly and sat down next to her on the same couch.

"Zenjirou?"

Now sitting next to her, Zenjirou took Aura's left hand, which was folded in her lap, and said to her while peeking at her face from the side.

"But that's the best way, right? Then I don't mind. A bad reputation of that level has no real harm and actually wards off any weird worshippers instead, so isn't it all good?

Besides… That hearsay is, in fact, the complete truth."

"Zenjirou…"

Aura smiled softly while Zenjirou still held her left hand, and reached out her right hand for his face. Then,

"Your face is all red."

she pointed that out.

The husband had endured the embarrassment to comfort his wife. He revealed his emotions on a very rare occasion and raised a loud voice.

"H- Hush! And here I tried my best to endure the shame and confessed…!"

The Queen entirely regained her smile from seeing her bright red husband, lovingly caressed his cheek with her right hand and apologized with a chuckle.

"Sorry, my bad. I was just too happy about your devoted words, so I unconsciously ended up teasing you. Thank you. I will definitely repay you."

While pleasantly feeling the fingers of his wife on his blushed cheek, Zenjirou replied with a lowered tone.

"Nah, no need to. It's me, who gets completely taken care of all the time anyway. When I think of it as an effort to preserve my current lifestyle, it isn't worth mentioning."

In response to his words, Aura, too, answered honestly without reservation this time.

"Right. I am the Queen, so I cannot afford to have a bad reputation. I can make use of notorieties in regards to my cool-headedness in diplomacy or my sternness on the battlefield, but not so much about a bad reputation concerning love affairs."

If the rumour spread that the Prince Consort was "refusing concubines because he was head over heels for the Queen", it would label him as a "fool not interested in politics" at worst, but if the rumour spread that the Queen "denied him any concubines because she was head over heels for him", then voices would be raised at once, saying "I am worried with such a Queen on the throne".

If either Zenjirou or Aura had to end up with the stigma of being "lost in love", it was inevitable that it would be Zenjirou.

For a while, Zenjirou held Aura's hand and let her caress his cheek, then he let go of the hand of his beloved wife and started to talk with a serious expression again.

"Now I actually have a request myself, too. Forgive me as well for taking back by previous statement, but I would like to attend a bit more activity outside the inner palace. Would that be alright?"

Aura's relaxed expression froze for a moment upon his words.

He wanted to leave the inner palace. In itself that wasn't anything unusual, but as his wish was all too different from his behaviour so far, Aura unintentionally assumed a caustic tone.

“You want to? Why?”

Zenjirou picked out the Queen’s biting tone quite well, but didn’t flinch from it and answered while keeping a soft tone.

“Yeah. The burden on you in the last month was quite huge, wasn’t it? So I thought I would substitute for you in suitable events that don’t require complicated decisions.

Of course I’m aware that by doing so, brings the danger of nobles approaching me, but right now, I’m more worried about your health.”

“Hmm…”

Aura didn’t respond to the sincere words of her worried husband for a while.

It certainly was a fact that her work had became more difficult in the month since her pregnancy had been confirmed. Although her duties as the Queen were few, she had thought that she was tending to the laws and personnel enough to keep the country going, but it was likewise a fact that it would be so much easier when there was a royalty, who could take her place.

“Mhm, I am happy about your offer, but it will bring you a lot of trouble, you know?”

Zenjirou nodded with a smile when Aura called attention to it.

“I’m prepared for that. Or so I say, actually it might be worse than I imagine.”

“It will definitely far worse than what you imagine. Once you start getting active outside of the inner palace, the ambitious nobles are not the only ones that will pester you. Even my loyal retainers will treat you with suspicion.”

The Prince Consort would actively leave the inner palace. While it was a great chance for the ambitious people in the country, it seemed like a threat to the loyal retainers of Aura on the other hand.

Aura’s right-hand man, Secretary Fabio and others would surely track Zenjirou’s every single move with doubtful eyes.

Zenjirou made a slightly troubled face upon her answer and replied.

“Of course I’ll refrain from doing so if it causes you troubles…”

“Hmm…”

Aura mused for a moment. At the beginning, she certainly had wanted a “husband that didn’t meddle with politics at all”, but a “husband that helped her through thankless tasks with deliberation as not to rattle at her authority” was even more welcome than a “husband that did absolutely nothing”.

However, even though she came to know through their relationship until today that he had no evil intentions like stealing a march on her and taking power, it remained questionable if he had the necessary skills for conversations and negotiations to survive against the sly nobles without making any promises.

(Still, it is certain that my current condition will greatly affect my government later on. I never thought that a pregnancy would restrain me so much in my conduct)

In her initial plan, Aura had intended to keep giving birth to children in “consecutive years”, but that option was quite unrealistic, learning from the current situation.

The period from the pregnancy until delivery commonly lasted “ten month and ten days”. A year had twelve months, thirteen when there was an intercalary month. If she were to give birth to a child every year, she would spend five sixths of each year pregnant.

It undoubtedly would interfere with her duties.

(I guess it is too much of a burden after all to be a “mother” and a “Queen” at the same time)

At least it would be unrealistic to rule directly without a Marshal and a Prime Minister as she had done until now. However, Aura’s authority and influence would weaken in accordance with her diminishing burden when she appointed a Marshal and Prime Minister.

From now on, she would have to be even more mindful about the power balance to the influential nobles than right now.

(Taking that into account, it would be meaningful to have an ally, whose personality I can trust, even if I cannot rely on his abilities)

Aura faced Zenjirou.

"….."

Zenjirou looked her directly into the eyes and silently waited for her decision.

They gazed at each other at a close range for a while in silence. Before long, Aura then relaxed her expression and declared.

"Fine. The burden would certainly be too much for me like this. I am happy to receive your help. However…"

"Yes, I know. When 'you decide' that I'm causing trouble instead, then I'll shut myself into the inner palace by 'my own will' again."

Without letting Aura finish her sentence, Zenjirou assured her with a smile.

Even if she was the Queen, she would end up ruining her reputation when she, as the wife, interfered with her husband's free will. Zenjirou was thoroughly taught about the values of this country in regards to that.

Yeah, her husband was sympathetic to the core. Aura's expression was about to crumble for a moment from her husband's profound affection, but she braced herself right away and responded.

"Yes, sorry for all the trouble. I am counting on you. Come to think of it, you are scheduled to meet Knight Otario Maldonado outside of the inner palace to accept his vow of loyalty. I shall have my loyal retainer Fabio accompany you on that occasion."

Secretary Fabio would surely give him some precise advices. And even if she didn't want to consider it, he would immediately sense it when Zenjirou awoke to ambitions by chance, and undoubtedly "deal with it accurately".

"Well then, it is about time I retreat to the bedroom. It may be a bit earlier, but I have to increase my sleeping time, since I wake up in the middle of the night."

Aura said that, then slowly raised from the couch.

Recently, she woke up in the middle of the night due to feeling sick, albeit not every night. But even without that, Doctor Michelle had told her to get as much sleep as possible.

To begin with, it had become quite the habit to stay active during the night, too, due to the LED floor lamps Zenjirou had brought with him. During her previous daily routine, she had been already asleep by now.

"Huh? Already this late?"

Zenjirou looked at the digital clock on top of the shelf when she said that, and stood up from the couch as to follow her, softly taking her hand.

"Okay, then let's go to sleep."

"You do not really have to go along with my early bedtime, you know?"

Aura informed him like that while docilely letting her husband lead her by the hand.

"Nah, I wouldn't be able to relax here anyway, since the waiting maids are going to be on standby in the living room."

Zenjirou replied with that to her words.

The waiting maids of the inner palace were on night watch to cope with any unusual phenomena with Aura in the current phase of her pregnancy, where she showed symptoms of pregnancy discomforts. After Aura had gone to bed, the waiting maids took up station in the only room adjoining to the bedroom, namely this living room.

Zenjirou usually hated it when they imposed onto his private space, but he couldn't voice such a petty selfishness when it concerned the safety of his beloved wife.

Due to that, it lately stopped bothering him so much when the waiting maids were present in the room next door. That said, not so much that he could relax in the same room as them.

“I see. Then we are going to bed together, I guess.”

Aura said, then linked her arm with Zenjirou’s.

“Yeah, we are.”

Their current bedroom had two beds. Husband and wife, heading for their shared bedroom with separate beds, slowly opened the door to the bedroom while their arms were still linked as if they had a hard time letting go.

Chapter 05: First Step Outside

A few days later at noon.

“Knight Otario, I hereby appoint you as my personal knight. I expect much of your bravery and loyalty.”

In a room deep inside the palace, Zenjirou stood in front of the kneeling young knight and called out to him with a voice as dignified as possible.

Otario Maldonado.

The name of the knight that was kneeling before Zenjirou.

He was probably in his mid-twenties, close in age to Zenjirou. Dark brown hair, grey eyes and brown skin. The man had the typical colour hues of the Carpa Kingdom and was on his knee with a faithful expression.

His braced features gave the impression that he was honest and serious, but hardly anyone would be brave enough to relax his features during an oath ceremony in front of a direct royalty. It would be dangerous to judge his character from the first impression alone.

Zenjirou smoothly drew the sword he had taken from Otario out of its scabbard.

The well-forged iron blade reflected the sunlight shining in from the windows, and sparkled.

The blade was about fifty to sixty centimetre long. It seemed to be a one-hand sword, judging by the length of the hilt, but he didn’t think that one could swing its heavy weight with one hand so easily.

Zenjirou patted the shoulders of the kneeing Otario one after another with the flat surface of the drawn sword, then slowly sheathed it again.

Next up, Otario respectfully took the sheathed sword offered to him by Zenjirou, with both hands while still kneeling on the floor on one knee, and answered.

“I hereby swear to be yours to command, to put my life on the line, to never defy your orders, to never stray from the righteous path and to never be afraid of a distress.”

Thus, the oath ceremony of Knight Otario ended without a hitch.

After Knight Otario left the room of the palace, Zenjirou made a sigh of relief, so small that no one near could hear it. He somehow managed to get over it without committing any mistakes.

“Thank you for your hard work, Zenjirou-sama.”

Zenjirou shivered his body reflexively when the middle-aged man with a slender face— Secretary Fabio, standing in attendance behind him, called out to him.

Based on their social standings, the middle-aged man was a subordinate lent to him from Aura, but if Zenjirou’s eyes weren’t playing a trick on him, then the secretary showed not the slightest bit of such an acknowledgment in his eyes directed at him.

For Zenjirou, they rather seemed to show something on the lines of “I’m keeping a close watch on every single movement of the stallion, who came out unwanted, so he doesn’t do anything stupid”.

(He wouldn’t use something like “thank you for your hard work” to begin with, if he acknowledged my superiority…. Wait, not good. That’s not quite right. The words are translated smoothly thanks to the “soul of words”, so I forgot about it, but this is a different world after all)

From their first meeting until now, the middle-aged man had only taken an attitude that could never be misunderstood as favourable, so Zenjirou, too, unconsciously ended up harbouring negative feelings more than necessary.

Words of appreciation were directed from a superior to an subordinate and the opposite was considered to be rude. At least that was common sense in the Japanese society. It certainly went too far to suspect a spite behind the words “thank you for your hard work”.

Zenjirou opened his mouth while he recalled the proper response as a royalty that he had learned in his lessons with Octavia, in his mind.

“No, it was nothing. I did it alright, didn’t I?”

He turned about and asked that, whereat Secretary Fabio asserted while keeping his stony mask as always.

“Yes. From now on, Knight Otario will be a direct henchman to you, Zenjirou-sama, while at the same time he serves for the Dragonback Archery Knights. The salary for a royal henchman accounts for twenty large silver coins per year, so it surely will be a great asset for the Maldonado Family.

Her Highness Aura will actually be paying him, but nominally you are doing the payments, so please keep it in mind.”

“Oh, he gets an extra salary?”

Zenjirou raised a slightly surprised voice, whereupon Secretary Fabio affirmed it without so much as twitching a muscle on his face.

“Yes. A knight’s loyalty is bought with money after all.”

These dreamless and uninspiring words didn’t match the idea of a different world in a fantasy setting.

Zenjirou tilted his a bit puzzled and inquired further.

“Is that so?”

“Of course it does not come from money alone. The words of the master strengthen the loyalty and the actions of the master maintain it. However, the foundation is kept up through money to the bitter end. Loyalty will not be established without the base of money.”

The frank words of Secretary Fabio were extremely pragmatic, but easily understandable for Zenjirou because of that.

It was disillusioning, but the knights without an own piece of land, only lived from the salary they received from the country. Bravery and loyalty were literally for sale and needed to fetch a price as high as possible.

“I see.”

With his inexpressive mask, Secretary Fabio watched Zenjirou as he nod convinced, and called out to him with a verbal expression of suddenly recalling something.

“Oh, that reminds me, do you have any plans to take a peerage or domain, Zenjirou-sama?”

Zenjirou shivered inside again upon the sudden topic chance while he replied without letting it show on his face or in his tone.

“Peerage or domain? What do you mean?”

“Yes. Our Carpa Kingdom has scattered landholdings under the direct control of the royalty, besides the capital and its outskirts. The lord of these lands is Her Highness Aura at the present time and governors are installed there, but as royalty, you have the right to take them over, Zenjirou-sama. Though your accession of them would only last for your lifetime.”

It wasn’t all that unusual that the king or royalty owned another peerage and land of their own besides the crown or right of succession to the throne. On the contrary, kings without a domain of their own were a minority. There were even some complicated cases, where the king of one country owned a peerage of a different country.

“It will be redundant when you stay inside the inner palace like you have so far, but when you increase your activities outside from now on, you would certainly need your own title and a capital you can spent freely. Not to mention, an independent source of funds will be essential should you desire to add more henchman like Knight Otario.”

Secretary Fabio brought his explanation to a finish like that.

Zenjirou was immersed in his thoughts.

(I see now. He got a point there, but…)

Considering that he was the “loyal retainer of the Queen”, it was obviously weird, even if he had a point.

When Zenjirou, the husband of the Queen, gained a title or domain, even if only nominal, and obtained an independent income, it meant that Aura would lose the control over him. To begin with, sharing even a part of the earnings from the scattered landholdings currently unified under Aura, simply meant that she had less money to spent freely, too.

The Prince Consort had a status and income of his own, levying an army of his own with that income.

That was obviously not something the close adviser of the Queen would suggest.

(Is he suspicious of me? No, it's too obvious, even if that's the case. If anything, he's giving me a warning, I guess, in a roundabout manner)

"….."

While he pondered like that, the secretary stood at attention and suspiciously watched his every movement with his strict eyes.

This man would definitely not miss an suspicious attitude from Zenjirou.

As he had sworn loyalty to Aura, he was trustworthy, but when he gave him a cold glare of suspicion like this, Zenjirou felt uncomfortable and fearful.

When Zenjirou was on Aura's side, the answer to this offer could only be "no".

Zenjirou knew at least that this wasn't the place to be obstinate and give an uncooperative answer, so he cleared his throat once with an affected cough, then honestly denied it.

"That won't be necessary. The centralization of finances and power is essential for the restoration of the 'royal family'."

"However, I thought you had made up your mind to leave the inner palace to be of use to Her Highness Aura? Excuse me for saying this, but even when you are Her Highness's consort and acknowledged as a direct royalty, your repertoire of what you can accomplish is rather limited without a title."

Provoking words from an inexpressive face with a flat tone. Zenjirou let his inner irritation boil up, temporarily softened his fear and wariness towards the man standing in front of him through anger and replied somewhat emotional.

"…Even if that's the case, it's a problem to be discussed between my wife and I. You've no right to propose it to me over her head."

After he said that, Zenjirou immediately regretted it with "damn, I went too far", but it was too late. However, surprisingly enough, the biting words and irritation uncloaked in his answer were satisfying for Secretary Fabio.

"…Yes, please forgive me for speaking out of line."

His inexpressive mask crumbled for a tiny bit and revealed a smile as he deeply lowered his head towards Zenjirou.

* * *

A few hours later. The sunlight, shining in from the windows, started to get a sunset tinge, when Secretary Fabio visited Aura, who was attending to her duties in her office.

"Your Highness, I have returned."

Aura only glanced at him as he bowed curtly while remaining seated at her desk.

"Well done, Fabio. You have done well, too, Alejandro. You may leave now."

The young and serious-looking man standing behind her— her second secretary Alejandro handed Secretary Fabio the pack of dragonskin parchments he was holding, upon his master's words.

"Fabio-sama, these are the documents for today."

"Okay. I will take over from here on."

"Yes, please do."

After handing the dragonskin parchments to the middle-aged first secretary, the second secretary sincerely bowed once, then left.

While hearing the door shut with a clatter behind him, Secretary Fabio headed over to the desk and called out to the writing Queen.

“Did you fare with Alejandro well, Your Highness?”

Aura stopped her hand that was leading the ball pen upon his question and raised her eyes from the paper at her hands to the slender face of her secretary standing in front of her.

“Quite so. His conduct is rather adorable, unlike yours. Still, he is not all that ‘quick on the uptake’ for his job yet. If I were to be feeling well, it would be alright to have him around to let him get accustomed to it, but right now he can fulfil a substitute role at best.”

The Queen gave a harsh evaluation, whereat Secretary Fabio answered with a light shrug of his shoulders.

“Understood. I will do my utmost from now on to teach him, so that he will meet your standards.”

As the first secretary, teaching the young secretaries was one of Fabio’s duties as well.

Aura had known Fabio for a long time, so she subtly sensed his burning passion for teaching the younger generation behind his stony mask, and pitied the young secretaries a bit.

Nevertheless, it was a fact that the skills of the young secretary were still lacking.

“Do that. By the way, how did it go?”

Not panicking on the sudden topic change, the middle-aged secretary was “quick on the uptake” and responded.

“Very well. The oath ceremony of Knight Otario finished without a hitch. Zenjirou-sama has already returned into the inner palace.”

Aura spilled a sigh of relief for now from the everything-is-fine report of her secretary.

“I see. Glad to hear. So, let me hear your opinion. How did my husband come across to you?”

It had already been to half a year since Zenjirou had come into this world. At this point, it certainly was a bit late to ask this now, but since Zenjirou had shut himself into the inner palace, where entrance was forbidding to other males, Secretary Fabio had no real chance to strike a genuine conversation with him until now.

However, now that Zenjirou had made up his mind to be more active outside of the inner palace to a reasonable degree, it was necessary to inquire what kind of impression her loyal retainer with the stony mask had of him.

The middle-aged secretary replied at once, as he already had prepared an answer to the Queen’s question.

“Very well. It appears that he is somewhat accustomed to keep up appearances from the outset. Due to that, I believe that he will not commit any fatal mistakes if we were to entrust official matters to him.

His etiquette gets a passing mark as well. There is much I would like to point out, but everything still is within a permissible scope. I would dare to say that it is unlikely that he will cause a problem due to being unaware of the etiquette outside.”

The secretary talked swiftly in a fluent speech, then temporarily stopped and added some more at the end after a short shrug of his shoulders.

“Also, I tried to tempt him into accepting a peerage and land from the holdings of the crown, but he rejected it.”

Aura showed a sullen face and buried her head in her hands when her secretary said so blatantly.

“There you go again with your provocations… Still, a peerage and land, huh. It certainly is worth considering in prospect of my husband’s future activities.”

The Queen took her hands off her face and supported her chin with them, immersing herself in her thoughts with a serious expression. In reaction, Secretary Fabio twisted the corners of his mouth into a faint smile and said bantering.

“Please talk about that in plenty between the two of you. Because it apparently is not a matter a mere secretary as myself can poke his noise into ‘over your head’.”

Aura discerned from his tone that Zenjirou must have said that and replied with a small smile.

“How typical of my prudent husband. I have it so much easier thanks to it. It might be better to prepare him only a peerage first of all for now, to gain some prestige.”

She gave him a favourable impression like that, but in fact, Zenjirou hadn't really acted with prudence in mind. He simply was aware of the fact that Aura and him may be on equal terms in private, but had a distinct distribution of roles, namely superior and inferior, in public.

From his experiences as a working adult for roughly three years, he had internalized how easily an organisation could go astray when they didn't share accurate information and had no coherent chain of command.

"Would it not be alright to let him succeed the title 'Duke of Valentia', considering his position as your husband?"

Aura answered the provoking words of her secretary with a low tone as if to threaten him while she kept her smile.

"Fabio, refrain from testing me. Do not worry, I have no intention to grant my husband that much power. At least while I sit on the throne, the dukedom of 'Valentia' and the county of 'Potosi' will remain under my control. I will not pass them on to anyone."

"A wise decision."

Being scolded by the Queen, the secretary shrugged his shoulders lightly without showing any sign of repentance, and evaluated her decision like that.

"Valentia" was the most flourishing seaport within the kingdom and "Potoshi" had the greatest silver mines in the whole kingdom.

The independent royal income from them exceedingly strengthened Aura's power in this feudal state. It would be nothing but a foolish move to entrust one of these two major sources of revenue to someone else besides her, even her husband.

"However, you currently cannot 'leap' to the locations, since you are pregnant. And leaving it all up to the governors is dangerous in itself."

Aura frowned when her secretary pointed that out, but she was sane enough to just nod to it.

"Yeah, I know. Giving him the title may be out of the question, but I would really like him to act as an administrator for it, when he learns to use 'Space-Time Magic'."

Detached lands originally tended to be an good breeding ground for corruption or revolts, but the reason why it functioned exceptionally well without problems in the Carpa Kingdom was the "teleportation" spell amongst the magic that the members of the royal family could use.

It required some guts and wits for people to scheme revolts or corruption when they didn't know when a sudden inspection would take place.

But at the present time, the Queen aka Aura was the only person in the Carpa Kingdom, who could use "teleportation". In that sense, it was desirable, too, that Zenjirou learned magic and many children with a direct bloodline were born.

"Indeed. Such an appointment would be worthwhile. That said, his greatest appointment remains to make a child with you."

"Well, yeah. Fortunately, that matter is progressing well. And I did not feel sick even once today either. According to Doctor Michelle, I already have the toughest phase of the morning sickness behind me."

Aura showed her brightest expression of today, whereat Secretary Fabio

"Glad to hear that. Come to think of it, you personally met the envoy from the Twin Kingdom today, did you not? What did he say?"

changed the topic and asked her.

The diplomatic differences with the Twin Kingdom. To find a point of compromise over what to do with the latent power of the "Bestowal Magic" that Zenjirou had, they had held a secret meeting today.

Aura lightly shrugged her shoulders on his question and answered.

"First of all, my initial impression was that they do not intend to restraint our child. But they seem to be ready to intervene if my husband were to make a child with someone else than me."

After she said that, she leaned her full body weight against the backrest of her chair and craned her neck once to ease the stiffness.

That reaction was what he had anticipated from the beginning. Convinced, Secretary Fabio inquired further.

“However, the child between Zenjirou-sama and yourself will definitely have inherited some remains of the ‘Sharrow Royal Family’ blood. Will the Twin Kingdom really be appeased just by not letting Zenjirou-sama take any concubines?”

Aura shrugged her shoulders once more and honestly shook her head.

“I doubt it. In fact, they hinted at tying the knot between my husband and a Princess of a branch family of the Sharrow Family. With the premise of taking the child between them to the Twin Kingdom, naturally.

This is nothing definite, but my gut feeling tells me that they are more focussed on winning over the ‘Space-Time Magic’ bloodline for their own country rather than trying to prevent that our country keeps the ‘Bestowal Magic’ bloodline.”

In that case, a royalty with mixed blood of the Carpa Family would be born into the Sharrow Family just like their child was going to born with mixed blood of the Sharrow Family. Probably something along the lines of: We’re even with you.

Of course, that was only an excuse from their side, while Aura had her own excuses.

The information that Zenjirou had latently inherited the Sharrow blood wasn’t verified, so if they were to accept their excuse as it is, then it could very well result in the simple theft of their “Space-Time Magic” bloodline.

To begin with, Zenjirou hadn’t intentionally stolen their bloodline or anything, so they had no reason to comply any further. Logically speaking, the Twin Kingdom had sent Aura and Zenjirou their “blessings” when they had married, so they had no right to complain about his bloodline now. That said, Aura didn’t expect either that foreign affairs followed such prim rules.

“I wonder at what point a compromise can be reached.”

“No idea. It is hard to say anything at this point. I am afraid that we will talk past each other for a while longer. After all, there is a ‘bloodline magic’ at stake. We both cannot yield for various reasons.

To look for the silver lining, they also recognize war as the very last and worst option.”

After saying that, Aura craned her neck again while still leaning against the backrest.

The Carpa Kingdom and the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell. Both were prominent major powers that reigned supreme on the South Continent. And both were aware that it wouldn’t end with a simple burn if they played with fire. However, there was nothing impractical like honour at stake this time. It concerned the “bloodline magic”, the power that made up the heart of a country. It seemed unlikely that a comprise would be reached so easily.

“In the worst case, it might not even reach a conclusion in your lifetime.”

Aura frowned from the realistic-tinted bad prediction that her secretary mentioned.

“…If possible, I would like to avoid that. The longer it takes to solve a matter like this, the more both sides will see the legitimacy of their own claims and stop compromising. I would rather not see that the generation of my child will spark the next great war.”

That said, Aura was a ruler, too. As a ruler, she couldn’t make any secret arrangements that would disadvantage her own country. If she were to do that, the foundation of her power would start to sway, bringing about the next crisis of a revolt.

“We can only prepare ourselves for a drawn-out argument. I am restricted until I give birth anyway and making overhasty decisions is never good. Further on, it will be troublesome when the secret gets out by chance. I am sure you can imagine what someone like Puyol would say if he were to get wind of this?”

As Secretary Fabio understood what Aura was getting at, he made a small sigh and agreed.

“…He would gleefully push a concubine onto Zenjirou-sama for sure. In order to actively steal the ‘Bestowal Magic’.”

The ambitious General Puyol would never let the chance to capture the bloodline magic of another country escape. And the prediction that sympathetic nobles would become a majority when General Puyol proposed the above, was even more troubling. The “Bestowal Magic” lineage was just that attractive.

It was quite likely that the moderate faction, anxious about the Twin Kingdom, would be cast aside.

“Prudence is the key, prudence.”

Aura mumbled as if to convince herself and unconsciously stroke her stomach holding the child with her right hand.

Chapter 06: A fierce Conflict in Form of Negotiations

A certain day a few months later.

Queen Aura had the nth secret meeting with the envoy from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell in a room of the palace.

Right now was the coolest season of the year in the Carpa Kingdom. The balmy sunlight, not getting hotter than twenty degrees during the day, shone in through the open windows and comfortably lightened up the room.

Aura's morning sickness was gone, but in exchange her stomach had started to stand out. Clad in an unusual loose and red dress, she was sitting on the couch and calmly called out to the envoy from the Twin Kingdom sitting upright across from her.

"As you can see, I am pregnant. Forgive my sloppy attire."

"No offense taken. I am extremely grateful to be granted an audience with Her Highness."

The envoy from the Twin Kingdom replied with formal words to the utterance of the Queen and bowed respectfully.

The emissary was a middle-aged man clad in the formal clothes of the Twin Kingdom composed of the colours white and purple. He was a low-ranking nobility without peerage or land, but he was entrusted with an important task this time, so they must trust in his personality and abilities quite a bit.

And in fact, he retained his unruffled composure so far, even in the face of the Queen of a major power.

This was Aura's fifth meeting with this man. Considering that he had come to the palace two month ago, five meetings seemed far too little compared to the importance of the discussed matter, but it was inevitable, since its concealment took priority.

When Aura, as the Queen of a country, repeatedly met a mere diplomatic messenger, even if the emissary was from a major power like the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, in a one-on-one conversation, then others would speculate that "something serious has happened".

Both countries had contrary interests, but they at least agreed on keeping the matter a secret.

"I am sure you know this already, but I cannot spare much time for you. Let us keep it brief and get started. Your Twin Kingdom sent us their blessing when my husband and I got married. You do not mean to take these words back, I take it?"

Just like she had informed him at the start, Aura immediately confronted him with overwhelming words and an overwhelming attitude.

"Why, of course not. My country has sincerely expressed their congratulations on your marriage. These words were by no means a deception."

The emissary from the Twin Kingdom respectfully lowered his head, but answered without being daunted.

They had no intention to withdraw their congratulations on the wedding of Aura and Zenjirou. In other words, the Twin Kingdom expressed that they didn't plan to intervene in regards to the child between them.

In a way, Aura accomplished her minimal goal by just squeezing that statement out of him. At least there was no longer any worry that they would meddle with the legitimate heir of the Carpa Kingdom. That was technically only natural, but Aura made a sigh of relief in her heart when she got a clear assurance. It was her biggest achievement in the last few month.

However, the emissary didn't give her any time to rejoice and hacked at Aura with polite words.

“Zenjirou-sama has been acknowledged as a member of the Carpa Royal Family. Another country has no reason to meddle with his future plans. We are aware of that. However, we would like you to understand the viewpoint of our country as well.”

“…Certainly. It is not like I cannot relate to it.”

Aura nodded with a solemn look, completely different than before.

At this point, Zenjirou had been accepted as the Prince Consort of the Carpa Kingdom by the countries on the Continent, so the Twin Kingdom originally had absolutely no legitimacy to meddle with Zenjirou’s bloodline now.

However, it was a fact that an important matter like the leak of a bloodline magic could spurn an official legitimacy, depending on the circumstances. Moreover, the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell was the major power ruling supreme over the central area of the South Continent.

Considering the worst possibility, an outburst of war, Aura couldn’t afford to push on completely aggressively.

It vexed her, but she needed to concede a point somewhere.

Aura softly rested her crossed arms on her stomach and suggested with an intentional lowered tone.

“My husband understands your standpoint and said that he would not make a child with other women, except for myself. Will that not suffice, considering that you said that you will not meddle with my child?”

As the Carpa Kingdom currently only had two successors to the bloodline magic, it was a generous compromise when they intentionally restricted the spreading of their bloodline. Aura had no intention concede any further.

But the envoy from the Twin Kingdom had different values.

“I extremely appreciated that. However, the marriages of royalty are often beyond one’s control. What would you do when Zenjirou-sama is forced to take a concubine due to some inevitable circumstances and their child awakens to the ‘Bestowal Magic’?”

Without backing off, the man stated his incisive opinion, whereat Aura clicked her tongue in hear heart while she outwardly kept her composed smile.

The man was actually right. There was no guarantee that the promise of a royalty not taking any concubines would be kept for all eternity. Secret arrangements without penal regulations for breaking it basically didn’t exist.

In fact, Aura didn’t have any intention to keep such a promise very faithfully, either. Of course she wouldn’t do anything foolish to unnecessarily provoke the Twin Kingdom, but she was considering breaking the promise with a suitable apology when the time should call for it.

She honestly hadn’t expected him to give her such a frank warning. The man had courage at least.

That said, Aura wasn’t such a heedless woman that she would take his excuse on trust.

“You are speaking no more than hypothetical here, are you not? I cannot see any reason in the current situation that would oblige me to answer that.”

Aura discarded it, whereupon the man stayed persistent with his still composed voice.

“However, it would not be all that strange when this hypothesis becomes reality, or not? I believe it would be wiser to consider possible difficulties in advance.”

The man was stubbornly insisting on his standpoint. It looked like it would require a lot of effort to drive him back without force.

Discerning that, Aura changed her approach a bit.

“I see. You have a point there. Then let me ask you: What would happen when the Sharrow Family breaks the agreement about not meddling with the child between my husband and I? I mean, when the lineage of my husband gets leaked to their branch families and they resort to some rash actions after knowing about it. Of course I am speaking theoretically to the bitter end here, but it would not be all that strange if that actually happened, or not?”

“Hmm…”

The man was at a loss for words for the first time upon her counterattack. She had only retaliated, but it had been extremely effective. Unlike Aura, who was the head of a country, the messenger was nothing a spokesman for his country and his allowed ad-libbing was limited.

Aura had attacked that very weakness.

“Well, you definitely made a valid point. Valid enough to consider it. Though the same applies to the hypothesis I just asked you.”

It was in a roundabout way, but she was saying “your argument and mine should be treated simultaneously”. The simultaneously made the suggestion sound impartial, but it was actually not.

Aura was a Queen that could decide everything on her own, whereas the man was a mere diplomat with limited authority.

“…Understood. I will consult with my country at once.”

In the end, the man couldn’t get any more results on that day.

* * *

Around the same time. Zenjirou attended a ceremony in the reception hall of the palace, clad in the formal attire of the Carpa Kingdom with the main colour red that still didn’t seem to suit him all too much.

Another chair was set up next to the empty throne. This seat was reserved to Zenjirou.

Normally, it was common sense that the throne for the ruler differed from the chair for the consort next to it through an easily visible distinction in size or decoration, but the chair Zenjirou was currently sitting on was nearly identical with the throne in size, decoration and quality of the stones used for it.

This again showed the problematic treatment of the first “Prince Consort” in history.

(The Prince Consort can’t outdo the Queen, but as a woman, the Queen can’t outdo her husband. Aura really has been put in a tight spot)

Now that he attended an official event like this, he experienced firsthand how hard his beloved wife struggled in this troublesome position.

To be honest, the evaluating gazes of the nobles were a great burden on his shoulder, but this hardship wasn’t worth mentioning when he thought about how the pregnant Aura had taken this work on her own shoulders.

Zenjirou dazedly let his gaze wander over the present nobles without looking them into the eyes, and waited for the ceremony to end like a well-behaved doll.

In principle, the ceremonies he attended in Aura’s stead were all of the kind, where a person with a “royal” title only had to be present.

Ceremonies that involved complicated procedures or delicate conversations could only be left to Aura.

(I just have to wait silently and well-mannered for it to end)

Zenjirou told himself to do so while he kept a tidy, doll-like seating posture on top of his vice-throne made of red stone.

His only role was to greet the nobles with a wave of his hand when the civil official, leading this ceremony, called his name.

(He’s gonna call on me any moment now)

Listening to the clear words of the civil official, Zenjirou started to mentally prepare himself. At that moment.

“Today, you are in the very presence of His Gracious Majesty Zenjirou-sama, a representative of the Carpa Family. Everyone, please give His Highness a grand applause!”

Zenjirou was so surprised by the unexpected words from the master of ceremonies that he unconsciously let the air get stuck in his throat.

But this wasn't the time to be surprised. When he looked at the face of the young civil official in charge of the ceremony, he didn't feel any malice from his words said just now, but even so, he couldn't leave it alone like this.

Originally, his task was only to silently wave his right hand now. He had no guarantee that acting here at his own discretion would be absolutely correct, but he could only muster his courage and proceed now that the situation called for an action.

Zenjirou lightly took a hold of the decorative bronze sword hanging down on the left side of his waist with his right hand, then reprimanded with a loud voice to suppress his nervousness.

"Correction! I am not here as a 'representative of the Carpa Family'. I am here to 'substitute for Her Highness Aura', the one and only absolute ruler of the Carpa Kingdom!"

It were sharp and forceful words, quite different from the usual Zenjirou. Of course they didn't come from the heart. It was a well-performed act, going to the utmost limits of his capacity.

However, by "putting his hand onto his sword", he signalized that "he was prepared to bestow punishment depending on the circumstances". As the young civil official had no way to read Zenjirou's thoughts, it was too much for him.

The master of ceremonies turned pale in the face upon the unexpected scolding of the direct royalty and corrected himself.

"M- My deepest apologies! Let me amend it. You are in the very presence of Her Highness Aura's husband Zenjirou-sama, acting as a 'proxy for Her Highness'!"

When he saw how the civil official was on the verge of collapsing, Zenjirou unconsciously felt like apologizing with the words "Sorry, I went too far".

In fact, an outsider not in the know might outrage that a social superior was bullying a social inferior for a small mistake when hearing this.

And as a matter of fact, no small number of the assembled nobles here directed a look at Zenjirou that seemed to say exactly that.

However, this mistake was something Zenjirou could never overlook in his position.

"Substituting for Aura" at this place meant that he had Aura's permission to be here after all.

On the other hand, being here as a "representative for the royal family" would imply that Zenjirou attended by the direct request of the organizer of this ceremony "without consulting with Aura".

In other words, Zenjirou would be executing his power as a royalty. That, of all things, should never be happening. Even without using the metaphor that a little leak will sink a great ship, it was obvious that the best method to avoid instances like this was not to allow a single precedent to happen.

(Not good. I had anticipated it to some extent, but they already started to recognize me as royalty more than I had thought)

Zenjirou deliberately averted his eyes from the noisy nobles and stifled his inner impatience.

It was common that a banquet hosted by the organizer would follow after the ceremony.

Such an occasion gave many chances for informal conversation with the nobles, so Zenjirou did his best not to attend any, as not to make any mistakes, but today he actively had to make use of this occasion to accomplish a certain goal.

Hence, he had swapped the second formal attire for the slightly more casual third formal attire and walked around the reception hall, where the banquet was held, in midday.

Those of lower rank were not supposed to casually call out to someone of higher rank. Due to that etiquette, Zenjirou himself had no choice but to go around, calling out to people, when he wanted to accomplish his goal.

He vigorously walked around on the red carpet in his unfamiliar cloth shoes in pursue of his goal.

“Oh, who have we got here? Count Bologna, I have heard your name from my dear wife, saying that you are a capable civil official and a cultured person that embodies elegance.”

“Ah, Zenjirou-sama. I am highly delighted for the praising words.”

Zenjirou indiscriminately called out to the nobles in the banquet hall, whose faces he could match with a name.

“I am really fortunate to get to strike a conversation with you here, Zenjirou-sama. Thank you very much for your attending today’s ceremony.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. It was a direct order from my beloved wife, Her Highness Aura after all. As her subject and her husband, doing a service like this is only natural.”

He emphasised that he was here “on Aura’s order” in all respects.

“If you say so. However, you yourself started to leave the inner palace more often lately, did you not? As a retainer, I am truly pleased about that. I guess the desire to spread your wings by yourself prevailed.”

Although the banquet was an informal gathering, his phrasing sailed close to the wind and Zenjirou inwardly clicked his tongue in response to them while he wracked his brain to the limit to come up with the most suitable answer.

“No, it’s nothing like spreading my wings. I feel like a candle without its fire when my dear wife is away from the inner palace due to her duties, so I merely do it to distract me from the loneliness.”

Saying so, Zenjirou grinned broadly.

(Will this do? I hope he understands now that I’m head over heels for Aura)

The noble in front of him laughed loudly with his shoulders trembling, whether he knew of Zenjirou’s inner thoughts or not.

“Hahaha, oh my. You truly have a deep affection for Her Highness.”

“Yes. I never considered myself to be such the devoted type either. Be it asleep or awake, my head is always filled with my dear wife and the child in her stomach.

As shameful as it is, it even affects my work in a bad way. Good grief, it’s really troublesome.”

(I’m a useless guy lost in love now. I’m a useless guy lost in love now…) Repeatedly telling himself that, Zenjirou temporarily abandoned his emotional properties such as shame and pride, which originally should be treasured, and let ring out a desperate laughter.

Thanks to that, the looks directed at him from all directions started to fill with disappointment and contempt one by one.

* * *

Around dusk, Aura finished her meeting with the messenger from the Twin Kingdom and returned to the inner palace, only to see that her beloved husband wasn’t back yet.

It didn’t happen often that Aura returned before Zenjirou.

“Come to think of it, he is attending a ceremony in my stead today.”

Aura mumbled after recalling it, then she took an orange bath towel from the basket in the corner of the room and sat down on the couch.

She covered her stomach with the towel, as she had untied some straps of the dress there.

“Fuh…”

She was choosing loose-fitting dresses during her pregnancy, but as a Queen, she had to dress appropriately when she appeared in public.

With the straps around her waist loosened like this, she felt relieved. The bath towel was a caution to prevent her recently growing stomach to get cold.

As Aura slovenly sat back in the couch, she suddenly felt thirsty and raised a voice.

“Someone.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Upon the Queen’s exclamation, a waiting maid immediately appeared from the next room, where she had been on stand-by.

Still leaning against the couch, Aura just directed her eyes at the young maid standing at attention and ordered her.

“I am thirsty. Bring me something to drink. Oh, and something light to snack as well.”

“Yes, very well.”

The young waiting maid bowed curt upon the Queen’s instructions, then she briskly opened the refrigerator in one corner of the room, poured water mixed with sugar and fruit syrup into a glass and put it onto the table.

“I will see about the snacks now. Do you have any requests?”

Aura mused a bit over the maid’s words and answered.

“Hmm… Something sweet, I guess. Oh, nothing fruity. And no need to hurry.”

“Yes, understood. Please wait a moment.”

The waiting maid bowed, then left the room.

Left behind, Aura took the glass from the table and drank its content.

The chilled, sweet and bitter drink refreshed her throat and she sighed satisfied.

“Mhm, recently it seems that my husband has gotten accustomed to the waiting maids, too. A development I really appreciate in terms of living conditions.”

Previously, Aura had refrained from calling the waiting maids into this room or the bedroom too often, in consideration to Zenjirou, who hated it when others intruded onto his private space, but ever since she became pregnant, Zenjirou was the considerate one instead and allowed the waiting maids to usually stay on alert near by.

Zenjirou had cooperated for the sake of the mother and child, but lately it seemed that he, too, became used to the waiting maids staying in the room next door. For Aura that had always been the norm, so she was pleased about it.

Of course she was ready to comply if he were to say “I can’t get used to it after all. Make them leave.”, but it surely was okay to exploit the good-will of her husband while she was pregnant.

Just when she put the glass back onto the table, she heard the clatter of the door opening behind her.

For a moment, she thought the waiting maid had already returned with her snack, but a maid would knock before entering the door without fail. There was only one person, who would open the door to this room without a knock or naming oneself.

Aura turned around on the couch and the face she expected greeted her.

“I’m home, Aura. How’re you?”

As he had attended an event as a substitute for Aura, Zenjirou was dressed in the formal attire for males in the Carpa Kingdom, a red vest over a white shirt embroidered with golden threads and wide trousers, and stood at the entrance of the room.

Since he had began to attend public events in Aura’s stead, this formal attire started to suit him more and more.

When Aura beheld the face of her returning husband— of Zenjirou, her mouth naturally formed a smile and she said with a bright voice.

“Yeah, all well. The morning sickness is gone now, too, so I had no interruptions with my duties today. Thanks to that everything went well.”

“Glad to hear.”

Replying with a smile, Zenjirou closed the door behind him, then swiftly walked over the carpet towards the clothes hook in the corner of the room.

After lightening himself by taking off the red vest and hanging it on the hook, he sat down next to Aura on the couch while fetching his own glass and a silver jar with fruit juice from the refrigerator on the way.

“Fuh”

The temperature wasn’t all too hot, but as he was exhausted from the unfamiliar event, his body was sweating all over. He stretched his collar as wide as a finger and fanned air into it.

Looking at her husband, who threw his body, slackened from being relieved of the stress, onto the couch, Aura opened her mouth.

“How did it go on your end? You attended the ceremony, right? Did anything bother you?”

She asked him that every day, since he started to leave the inner palace. Aura herself knew that she was being overprotective, but better that than being too late when she neglected to confirm it with him. Fortunately, her husband agreed with that line of thought and didn’t treat it as a bother. He always answered “No, nothing in particular” with a smile.

However, today Zenjirou suddenly frowned and gave an answer different from usual with a serious expression.

“Yeah, about that, there was something.”

“Mh…?”

Did some problem occur? Aura tensed up from her husband’s behaviour, corrected her seating position on the couch and waited for his elaboration with a serious look.

“Actually, I was called a ‘representative for the royal family’ during the ceremony today. Instead of ‘your substitute’, you see.”

Zenjirou added that he immediately corrected it of course.

“That… is indeed a bit problematic.”

Aura showed the same grim expression as him upon his remark.

It had been a couple of months, since Zenjirou had started to attend ceremonies or evening parties in her stead.

Zenjirou himself hadn’t changed his stance of being nothing more than a substitute for the pregnant Aura, but when a male member of the royal family appeared at a public event by himself, then the culture of this country made it inevitable that some people would rather attach importance to Zenjirou, a man, than to Aura, a woman, even if she was the Queen.

Needless to say, Aura appeared in public more often than him, even now that she was pregnant. Zenjirou was only substituting for her in a few events that weren’t all that important and didn’t require decisions on the spot.

Nevertheless, rumours about a “power shift” spread when a male royalty acted as a proxy for the Queen. Their uneasiness and dissatisfaction about the Queen must have gained the upper hand after all, seeing as her duties were left undone due to her pregnancy.

Aura and Zenjirou looked at each other and opened their mouth nearly at the same time.

“If that happened intentionally, it will be problematic.”

“If that wasn’t intentionally, it’ll be a problem.”

The couple uttered completely opposite sentences, which seemed to be a bit similar though, at the same time and fell silent for a moment, then they tilted her heads puzzled.

“…Huh?”

"…Eh?"

The silence was broken by Zenjirou first.

"Ehm… Why's it problematic when it was intentionally? Could you explain?"

"Well, think about it. Mistaking it on purpose means that he obviously intends to sow discord between us. How can that not be problematic? Why did you think that it would be problematic the other way round?"

Aura exposed her train of thought with clear words and asked for his opinion next.

On the other hand, Zenjirou, too, properly put his thoughts into words, albeit not as distinct as Aura.

"Yeah, when he didn't do it on purpose, it means that the people of the palace have unconsciously started to see me as a 'single member of the royal family' instead of 'your substitute'. And going by the values of this country, I thought that some people would complain that I'm your puppet."

Even if she was the Queen and he her consort, the patriarchic society of the Carpa Kingdom didn't appreciate it when the man was subjected to the woman. So far, it had only been overlooked, since Aura had achieved actual results and Zenjirou had a dubious origin of a different world.

In the worst case, the palace might split into conflicting parties, the "Queen's followers" and the "Prince Consort's followers".

And even more troublesome was the fact that the people, who tried to dismiss Aura and install Zenjirou, actually had valid reason to do so at the present time.

In this world, royalty equalled being a user of a bloodline magic. The count of the royal family contributed to the strength of the country in equal measure.

However, the current royal family of the Carpa Kingdom only consisted of two people: Aura and Zenjirou. Inevitably, it was desirable that the two of them made as much children as possible. But in that case, the mother aka Aura would repeat pregnancies and deliveries over a long period of time.

Under these circumstances, it was more efficient when Zenjirou assumed the official duties while Aura concentrated on giving birth to healthy children.

That certainly made sense. Although only when Zenjirou's capacity to govern was on par with Aura's.

Anyway, Aura understood what Zenjirou was getting at.

She leaned her pregnant body against the backrest of the couch and sighed deeply.

"I see now. You want to say that the change in the perception of everyone, where they unconsciously mistake it, is a greater problem than the scheming of a few people, who mistake it intentionally."

"Yeah. At least I think so. Well, in my opinion, it was only a matter of time anyway, now that I went outside."

Answering like that, Zenjirou shrugged his shoulders a bit while he still sat slovenly on the couch.

"Certainly. Then let us carefully exchange information from now on as a countermeasure, so that we do not fall victim to rumours or schemes to alienate us."

"Yeah. Also, I shouldn't take a position, where I've free access to power and capital. If you were to propose that, it would give you a bad reputation, namely 'infringing your husband's rights', so we ought to extensively highlight the stance that I 'rejected any bothersome stuff' from my end."

Zenjirou was already taking the blame for the concubine matter and now he casually declared that he would take the blame himself again.

"Hmm… That certainly is the best solution. Still…"

Aura unconsciously made a bitter face, but she found it hard to object, since she realized that doing as he said was the most beneficial for the royal family.

However, by doing so, his current bad reputation of "a fool head over heels for the Queen" due to rejecting concubines, would be extended by "a lazy fellow that hates work".

Joined together it became “a lazy fellow that didn’t work and was smitten by a woman”. Well, considering that he ran away to a different world to break away from his salaryman life after falling in love with Aura at first sight, that evaluation might be surprisingly fitting.

Zenjirou then added, as to give his wife, who just couldn’t bring herself to honestly agree, a last push.

“On my way back here, I consulted Secretary Fabio about it and he, too, said that it would be ‘acceptable‘.”

Since he himself had brought it up and even her loyal retainer approved it, Aura couldn’t deny it anymore. All the more, since she herself understood its effectiveness as long as she just ignored her feeling of guilt.

In the end, Aura nodded while making a sigh.

“Fine. Then I will presume upon your goodwill again. Still, it seems it is going well with Fabio. I am relieved. He is quite capable, but not so much affable, so I was a bit worried.”

Zenjirou quickly averted his eyes upon the unexpected topic change and answered murmuring while looking the other way.

“Yeah, well, it is ‘going well’. Though we’re not ‘getting along well‘…”

Aura unconsciously smiled in response to her husband’s obvious sullen face.

“Glad to hear. If you were able to ‘get along well’ with that man, then I would be unable to find any peace of mind, since I would have to deal with two men of his calibre, one at work and one at home.”

At first, Aura started with a playful tone, but in the end she practically spit the words out. Apparently she had accumulated more retorts about the blunt way of speaking from her loyal retainer, than she had thought.

Zenjirou discerned from her tone that they both seemed to have the same sentiment towards the man called Fabio, and faced his wife again with a relaxed expression.

“Right. One of him is enough.”

“Yes. But one is necessary. To be honest, he sometimes ticks me off, but he is valuable, since he is not afraid to speak about unpleasant matters with me. Even more so when it is done out of good intent instead of malice. Try to get on with him as well as possible.”

“Okay. I’ll get along with him ‘as well as possible’.”

He didn’t bother to hide the wry smile on his face as he nodded.

Chapter 07: The Secret Contract is signed

One month later.

In the living room of the inner palace, Zenjirou faced his computer and typed down the contents of the secret contract that his wife Aura was reading to him.

The season had now changed into what would be fall in Japan.

On the South Continent this period was commonly called the “rainy season”. Just as the name implied, it wasn’t all that unusual that rain clouds covered the sky for more than half the month and it rained for more than ten days in a row.

Downpours on the level of small typhoons went on endlessly, which made the rainy season of Japan with its drizzling rain look adorable instead.

Of course this weather brought along the problem of many floods, but the rain of this season nurtured the vegetation of the Carpa Kingdom and left the soil with a rich blessing of water, so it wasn’t all loathsome.

And today, too, the rain poured down heavily since the morning, true to this season.

The shutters of the windows were closed tightly as the wind was unfavourable while the downpour continued.

Due to that, the interior of the room was so dark that he would have trouble seeing the keyboard at his hands without any lamps, even though it was still noon. Needless to say, the six floor lamps were turned on right now, spending sufficient light, but it facilitated the illusion that it was already night.

“…, the Twin Kingdom will have to pay the Carpa Kingdom three thousand gold coins as a penalty. That is the end. Did you get all of it? If you want, I can read it out one more time.”

Sitting on the couch dressed in red maternity clothes, Aura called out to her husband with that after she had read from the dragonskin parchment in her hands.

Zenjirou typed clattering on the keyboard with his back still to his wife and replied a moment later.

“…No, it’s okay. I got all of it, I think. Just in case, I’ll read it out loud again, so can you check if anything’s wrong?”

“Okay.”

Hearing his wife’s response from behind, Zenjirou corrected his posture on his chair and read the text he had typed just now, from the computer display.

“Good, here I go.

1) Zenjioru Carpa [henceforth Z] will not make a child with anyone except Aura Carpa [henceforth A] from now on.

2) The Twin Kingdom will never meddle with the direct offspring of [A].

3) When the Carpa Kingdom breaks term 1), namely [Z] makes a child with someone else than [A], the Twin Kingdom has the right to examine the child [henceforth C] about its bloodline aptitude.

4) When the ‘Bestowal Magic’ element is confirmed in [C], [C] will study abroad in the Twin Kingdom for three years, starting with its fifteen year of age.

5) When the Twin Kingdom forces [C] to emigrate during the study stay, the Carpa Kingdom can send [C] home to their country ahead of schedule.

6) When [C] wishes to emigrate to the Twin Kingdom out of its own will after the three years abroad, the Carpa Kingdom has no right to prevent that.

7) [C] has the right to spread the knowledge it learned in the Twin Kingdom only amongst the Carpa Royal Family after returning home.

8) When the Twin Kingdom breaks term 2), namely tries to meddle with the offspring of [A], …”

Zenjirou smoothly read out aloud the Japanese text shown on the display.

Simply put, this treaty dealt with the added conditions from the respective countries in regards to the “restriction on Zenjirou’s reproduction” and the “restriction on the Twin Kingdom’s meddling with the Carpa Kingdom”.

From what he could tell on a glance, Aura seemed to have worked very hard to force through these details.

It was clearly specified that Zenjirou was not allowed to make a child with someone beside Aura, but considering that a breach of that term was minutely written out, it seemed that the Twin Kingdom also regarded it unlikely that this condition would be kept in reality.

In fact, most of the conditions concerned the treatment of “a child, born between Zenjirou and a woman besides Aura, that could use ‘Bestowal Magic’”.

At this point, he had no intentions to make a child with another woman and there were no restrictions for a child with Aura, so there was nothing to complain about as far as he was concerned.

However, that didn’t mean he had no doubts. Zenjirou was used to the detailed contracts of the modern age, so this secret contract with only a good dozen of terms seemed rather sketchy to him.

With that in mind, he turned around on the chair to look behind him.

“Mh? What is the matter, Zenjirou? Did anything bother you?”

Lifting her body a bit from the backrest of the couch, his wife looked at him with a smile, whereupon he was convinced for no reason.

(Okay, Aura and the Twin Kingdom must have purposefully left in some room for “convenient interpretations”)

Zenjirou had sensed the shortcomings of the contract from a single glance, so it was hardly thinkable that Aura and the agent of the Twin Kingdom failed to notice this in their negotiations that lasted for more than half a year.

He came to such a conclusion of his own accord, but he was actually giving the royalty in the different world a little bit too much credit.

It was an undeniable fact that Aura and the middleman of the Twin Kingdom were smart people, way more used to negotiations than Zenjirou, but the culture of this world didn’t had a custom, where contracts were concluded right down to the last detail like in developed nations of the modern age, to begin with.

His line of thought, accustomed to considering all future possibilities and apprehending any inconveniences for the own side, was basically unorthodox.

(Oh well. Aura or Secretary Fabio will surely intervene in the middle of it when it goes wrong)

“Hmm, give me a sec. There’s something I would like to speak about a bit more.”

With that in mind, Zenjirou said this sentence in advance, then checked if the printer had enough A4 copy paper and printed out the secret contract he had read out just now.

“Oof.”

With the Japanese version of the contract in hand, he said down next to Aura.

As her stomach was growing bigger, Aura was forbidden to lean forward.

Zenjirou held up the dragonskin parchment in the local script and the copy paper he printed out just now, in front of Aura in such a way that she didn’t have to change her seating posture, and stated his own opinion.

“Look here. That’s the first thing that bothered me. When 2) becomes inconsistent with 3) in the future…”

The pregnant wife was a bit surprised about the surprisingly attentive pointer of her husband, but she responded politely.

“Mhm. Then 2) will obviously…”

However, Zenjirou wasn’t convinced by Aura’s explanation and probed into it.

“But since it hasn’t clearly been written there, they could insist…”

“You certainly have a point, but…”

Then the two of them huddled together and continued to discuss the contents of the secret contract until one of the waiting maids came to announce that the dinner was ready.

* * *

Early afternoon of the next day.

After lunch, Zenjirou was walking down the hallway of the palace next to Aura.

He wore cloth shoes with a leather sole from a hulking dragon, yet he was unsteady on his feet for a while now, just as if walking on sponges.

Under the pretext of supporting his pregnant wife, Zenjirou was walking hand in hand with Aura, but the sensation of her hand actually helped him to somehow keep his composure instead.

Aura must have grasped the mental state of her husband. She encouraged him by periodically returning the tight squeeze on her hand. He was grateful for it, but at the same time, he felt a bit pathetic.

(Nonetheless, it would be more absurd to be not nervous here. I haven’t been this nervous since my senior told me to be in charge of a contract all by myself for the first time)

Zenjirou unconsciously made such an excuse at heart.

The assigned task back then had been rather insignificant, but the whole shebang around it was in an entire different league.

He would gladly take a deep breath now to ease his nervousness, if he could.

And he would have undoubtedly done so if it were only Aura and himself here. To his sorrow however, they weren’t alone right now.

Even if it was inside the palace, the Queen and the Prince Consort were walking around together.

They were guarded by a total of eight soldiers as they walked next to each other: Four in front and four in the back.

The soldiers’ armament consisted of a white leather armour and a splendid short spear, which seemed to be more fit for a ceremony if anything, but the defence of the armour and the sharpness of the short spear were the real deal.

Zenjirou shivered his spine when he happened to see the glint at the tip of the spear.

In his head he knew that they were his guards, but he felt uncomfortable to be surrounded by people, who were armed with tools to kill a person.

(Well, considering our positions, the escort is actually extremely small)

If Zenjirou were to operate “outside” instead of the far interior of the palace like here, then at least ten times as much guards ought to accompany him. In fact, more than five times as much guards had protected him when he attended an official event in the palace in Aura’s stead.

While such thoughts crossed his mind, the vanguard stopped in front of a door.

The soldiers took position to both sides of the door, standing at attention and holding their spears vertically. Aura and Zenjirou, too, stopped in front of the door.

The envoy from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell was waiting beyond this door.

“…..”

Zenjirou naturally faced Aura, standing next to him. The moment their eyes met, his wife nodded curt, to which Zenjirou nodded curt in turn as well and shortly ordered the soldiers left and right to him, suppressing his reflex to open the door himself.

“Open it.”

“As you command!”

Upon his order, one soldier slowly opened the door.

Zenjirou took a short, deep breath, so that no one around noticed it, and passed through the door with deliberate slow steps.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Zenjirou-sama. My name is Moreno Militello, a diplomat from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell. I am terrible honoured to be granted the chance to meet you in person.”

The middle-aged man lowered his head respectfully on the other side of the table, whereat Zenjirou nodded collected on his chair and replied shortly.

“I’m Zenjirou, the husband of Her Highness Aura, the Queen of the Carpa Kingdom.”

When he introduced himself internationally, he always said this. A declaration of his intention that he was present as the Prince Consort of Queen Aura, not as a member of the royal family.

Whether the diplomat sitting across him understood his aim or not, he lowered his head once more with a respectful expression, saying “very well”.

“Now that my husband has introduced himself, let us get to the issues at hand. We have not much time after all.”

The one to broach the topic was Aura, sitting next to Zenjirou.

She sat somewhat slovenly on the chair, resting against the backrest so that her grown stomach wouldn’t be a hindrance, but even in that posture, her words were overflowing with the characteristic strong pressure of a person that was used to give out orders arbitrary.

“Yes, very well.”

The diplomat lowered his head yet again with polite words, whereupon Aura put her hand against her chin, whose recent roundness worried her a bit, and

“Mhm, okay then, which matter do you want to start with, the official one or the real one?”

asked.

“Yes, please allow me to settle the simple, official matter first. The ‘rings’ you have requested, have arrived.”

The middle-aged diplomat responded to the Queen’s words with that and put two rings wrapped in a thick purple cloth onto the table.

It were pair rings with three brilliant diamonds embedded in a golden socket.

There was no doubt that these were the two wedding rings Zenjirou had bought on Earth.

To the “normal eye”, they looked completely unchanged, but Zenjirou had awakened his ability to detect magical power through the continuous lessons with Lady Octavia in the past one year or so, thus he now saw the radiance of magical power emitting from the rings.

Compared to the magical power coming from his or Aura’s body, it was rather faint, but it was his first time seeing a simple, inorganic object with magical power.

The delivery of their wedding rings, which they had requested to be turned into magic tools. That was the “official” matter for which the diplomat of the Twin Kingdom was granted an audience with both Aura and Zenjirou. Zenjirou usually only left the inner palace to “substitute for Aura”, so an official reason like this was necessary for him to accompany Aura here without raising suspicion.

As Zenjirou viewed the rings curiously, the diplomat eloquently explained the magic effects of the rings.

“The ring of Her Highness Aura has the magic ‘Ignition’ and the ring of Zenjirou-sama has the magic ‘Spring of Water’ worked into it. The Ignition is the beautiful handicraft of ‘Prince Francesco’ while the Spring of Water is the delicate handwork of ‘Princess Margarita’.”

The one, who reacted to these names, was Aura.

“Oho, it is quite an honour to have Prince Francesco and Princess Margarita deal with it. I will prepare a letter of gratitude later on, so please pass it on to them.”

Prince Francesco and Princess Margarita. Both were direct descendants of the Sharrow Family and famous practitioner of the “Bestowal Magic”. Apparently they weren’t so stupid to skimp on a request for magical tools, even if they were disputing with the business partner on a secret matter.

“Yes, I will make sure to deliver them.”

With these words of the diplomat, the official matter, namely the delivery of the rings, was concluded.

Now the real issue at hand followed.

“Well then, I would like to address the real matter, seeing as we are pressed for time. This is the official document for the ‘treaty’ this time. Please read through it once now and sign it here when you consent with it.”

Saying so, the diplomat spread a light green dragonskin parchment on the table.

Although it was a secret contract, the official document was still written on surprisingly exquisite parchment. Black letters on light green parchment, which was close to white in colour.

Zenjirou’s reading skill of the characters of this world was still only on the level of a 7th Grader for English, but even he could tell that the letters on the dragonskin parchment were written extremely cleanly, worthy of being called a “neat handwriting”.

Confronted with the document of the treaty, Aura spoke first.

“I am afraid that my husband still cannot read our characters. Please read everything out aloud.”

“Oh, right. Forgive me. Allow me to read it then.”

The diplomat pointed at the lines on the parchment before them one by one as he read them out aloud.

“I will begin now.

1) Zenjioru Carpa [henceforth Z] will not make a child with anyone except Aura Carpa [henceforth A] from now on.

2) The Twin Kingdom will never meddle with the direct offspring of [A].

3) When the Carpa Kingdom breaks term 1), namely [Z] makes a child with someone else than [A], the Twin Kingdom has the right to examine the child [henceforth C] about its bloodline aptitude…”

Zenjirou pricked up his ears as not to miss anything while keeping an inexpressive face with all his might, but so far, nothing seemed off in the contents.

The voice of the diplomat, reading out the document, only showed a small change at the end.

“…will have to pay three thousand gold coins as punishment.”

That was the end of the contents that Aura had read out to Zenjirou last night. However, the dragonskin parchment, which the diplomat was reading out line by line while pointing at them, had another paragraph below.

After a moment of silence, the diplomat let his cheek twitch and read the following line while pointing at it.

“Extra paragraph: When term 2) becomes inconsistent with term 3) in the future, term 2) gets priority. …That is all of it.”

That paragraph was proposed by Zenjirou to Aura last night.

Term 2) became inconsistent with term 3). To put simply: The question whether the Twin Kingdom had the right to meddle with a future child that was born in a marriage between a direct offspring of Zenjirou and Aura, and a branch offspring of Zenjirou and a concubine, or not.

According to term 2), the Twin Kingdom had no right to meddle with that child, since it would have descended in a direct line from Aura. However, according to term 3), the Twin Kingdom had the right to meddle, since that child also descended in a line from a concubine, which was a breach of the contract.

This didn’t concern the generation of Zenjirou’s children, but it was a realistic problem for the generation of his grandchildren at the earliest, or his great-grandchildren at the latest.

Zenjirou glanced surprised at Aura, whereat she smiled at bit and nodded slightly.

Last night, he had pointed out various shortcomings of the secret contract, but he had heard that the contract would be signed as scheduled today, so he had jumped to the conclusion that his opinion hadn't been considered.

(Did she add the paragraph in a meeting prior in the morning? …I just can't hold a candle to my wife)

He was once again smitten by the effort of his wife, but likewise, Aura had a similar sentiment for her husband, too.

In compliance with common sense, it was only normal that term 2) would take priority over term 3). However, it was possible that they reasoned against it when it wasn't put down in writing, just like Zenjirou had feared last night.

At the present time, the Twin Kingdom could hardly quibble about it, since the balance of power between the two countries was nearly equal, but the future was uncertain. It wasn't a pleasant prospect, but if the Carpa Kingdom were to greatly fall behind the Twin Kingdom one day, it was thinkable that a direct descendant of the royal family in the future was manipulated under the pretext of term 3).

To exaggerate it: Zenjirou nipped a future threat to the Carpa Kingdom in the bud with his suggestion. This actually might be an incredible achievement.

As the matter was confidential, the addition was principally considered to be done at Aura's discretion, so it wasn't an official achievement for Zenjirou.

(Thus, at least I will keep his achievement that stilled the fears for the future of our country, in mind)

Aura put her name under the secret contract with the dragon bone dip pen after she dipped it into the ink pot while she vowed that in her heart.

* * *

Zenjirou and Aura returned to the inner palace by late evening after signing the secret contract without problems.

Back in their living room, they quickly took off their formal attire and changed into the comfortable casual wear.

"Allow me to give you a hand."

"Yeah, go ahead."

As one might expect in her current state, Aura let the waiting maids help her with nearly all of her change of clothes.

Two maids helped her out of the dress she had worn and exchanged it for just a thin dress that resembled more a negligee than maternity clothes. Then Aura immediately sat down on the couch as her grown stomach was too much for her.

"Fuh…"

With her body buried into the couch, Aura leaked a big sigh from her mouth.

Even she was exhausted today. In the morning she had done the final adjustments to the secret contract and in the evening she had signed it.

Aura was blessed with a good physique and even had trained as a soldier, so her stamina clearly differentiated from an average woman, but even so, it must have been a great burden to her to adjust and sign a secret contract, which determined the future of the country, during her pregnancy.

On the other hand, Zenjirou changed into a T-Shirt and jeans by himself in the bedroom, since he still felt uncomfortable to change in front of the waiting maids, then returned into the living room.

"Good job, Aura. Here, a cocoa."

Zenjirou put the freshly prepared hot cocoa he had made by pouring hot water from the water boiler into a mug with two tablespoons of cocoa powder, in front of Aura.

He had gotten a black tea for himself. After letting the teabag soak in the hot water in the mug, he put plenty of brown sugar into the nicely dyed tea, adding a slice of a sour fruit like a lemon as the final touch.

Although he often drank his black tea straight, he just craved for some super sweet and sour tea when he was exhausted like today.

"Oh, thanks."

Taking the mug with the cocoa, Aura sipped the foaming sweet liquid and sighed relieved.

Normally Zenjirou would sit down next to her, but today he took a seat on the couch on the other side of the table, as he wanted to discuss something face-to-face.

At the same time, the waiting maids, who had stood at attention on the side so far, bowed and left all together.

They did that in consideration for Zenjirou, who still couldn't relax when the maids were in the same room.

"For now, the trouble with the Twin Kingdom has settled down, I guess?"

After confirming that the waiting maids had left, Zenjirou broached that, whereat Aura put her mug back on the table and nodded once.

"Yeah. Now they should no longer be able to say anything, at least as long as you do not take a concubine."

Zenjirou showed a slightly sullen face in response to her words.

"Okay. I've been thinking about this since I read the secret contract, but is my concubine matter still prevailing?"

He went through great pains to endure the shame as he gave the impression that "he was head over heels over Aura" at the night banquet, yet that sacrificial effort was all in vain?

Aura smiled a bit at the spiritless Zenjirou and shook her head.

"No, that matter has died down at the present time as well. It seems your activities were successful. The number of people trying to promote a concubine has decreased. Right now, their whole attention is caught by the question whom to send in as a wet nurse for our child."

Saying so, she lovingly caressed her big belly.

"Then…"

Determined, Zenjirou started to say something, but Aura shook her head once again before that.

"No. I know what you want to say, but that is not possible. You are better off not relying on any wishful thinking.

Sure, under normal circumstances, you could have stopped worrying about the future once you have three or four children with me. However, the current royal family only consists of you and me, as you know.

This situation is extremely abnormal for a major power. To give you a concrete example: In the Twin Kingdom, the Sharrow Royal Family has twenty-three members and the Jilbell Pope Family has nineteen members."

A royalty in this world was automatically a practitioner of a bloodline magic. The smaller the royal family, the lower the national strength. Simple as that. Her personal feelings aside, Aura, too, fully agreed with the viewpoint of the nobles, who deemed it necessary to expand the royal family, on a rational level.

Even now, Zenjirou stubbornly stated his opinion, as he probably still couldn't get it out of his mind despite understanding that reasoning.

"Ehm, then… we two should give our best?"

In response to his viewpoint, which could only be considered as thoughtless, Aura showed a wry smile without surprise and answered in a playful and affected behaviour of anxiety.

"Do you want to kill me!? How many children do you want me to bear while I manage a kingdom?"

"Well, in my world, there was a woman in the past, who was called an Empress and had a dozen of children with her husband while she ruled over a large country at war as a grand duchess, you see."

“…Was she really human? Maybe she had some blood of the ancient dragon race in her?”

Aura wrinkled the space between her eyebrows and tilted her head puzzled as if she had heard a shady story.

As expected, the anecdote of Austria’s sovereign Maria Theresa only sounded unrealistic to Queen Aura.

“Nah, that can’t be. I’m pretty sure she was a simple human.”

Zenjirou’s knowledge about Europe’s history was limited to what he had learned in history classes in high school, so he couldn’t explain it any further and the topic died.

“…..”

“…..”

Trying to think of a new topic, he suddenly recalled the rings in the pocket of his trousers.

“Oh, right. Hey, Aura, can you hold out your left hand?”

The topic change couldn’t have been more obvious, but Aura knew that he carried a profound aversion towards the concubine matter, so she dared to go along with this poor attempt of a topic change. The issue would surely settle in an unfavourable way for him anyway, so it shouldn’t hurt to put it off for a little while longer now.

“Mh? Okay, but give me your ring first. If we are going to do it, we might as well repeat ‘that’.”

Aura held out the palm of her right hand with a smile.

“Yeah, okay.”

Zenjirou put his own wedding ring in her hand, stood up from the couch and stepped up in front of her.

“Ah, you can remain seated.”

He stopped her by raising his hand, as she was about to stand up, and kneeled down before her while she sat on the couch. Then he took her left hand und tried to put the ring onto her ring finger.

“That will not work. My fingers are swollen right now. Take my little finger.”

“Ah, right, sorry.”

During her pregnancy, her whole hands had become swollen, increasing the size of her fingers by one. The ring was actually a perfect match for her ring finger, but now it was unlikely to fit.

It looked a bit lame, but Zenjirou tried to put the wedding ring onto his wife’s little finger while he kneeled in front of her, whereupon she whispered into his ear.

“Oh, you are not going to say anything? And here I was hoping you would say the words of that night again.”

Upon these words, Zenjirou flinched and stopped moving.

“That” night was referring to their first night together. After the marriage ceremony during the day, they had carried out their bridal night, then he had presented her that ring in the bedroom.

On that occasion, he had spoken the “marriage vow”, which was usually asked during the ceremony by the priest, by himself.

“Zenjirou…?”

“No, well, that was kind of a once in a lifetime thing…”

Aura snorted a bit with laughter towards her bashful and flustered husband and threw him an affected sorrowful look.

“Oh, too bad. The chance rarely presented itself again, yet you will not say it. Hmm….”

“….Aw, geez. Fine!”

As his wife tightly clenched her left fist, so that he couldn’t put the ring on, Zenjirou realized that he had no other choice but to give in.

“Hah… Fuh…”

He took a deep breath and after temporarily blowing out his shame, he started to recite with a voice as dignified as possible.

“I promise to love and respect, to comfort and help you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, in wealth and in poverty, until death do us part. I take this oath on this ring.”

“…..”

Aura showed a smile without saying anything and opened her fist.

The wide, yellow golden ring with the embedded three diamonds slipped onto her little finger.

A proof of love. A symbolic vow. Aura certainly could feel the warmth of her husband from the cold metal around her little finger.

For a while, Aura kept looking at the wedding ring on the little finger of her left hand and smiled sweetly, but before long, she faced her husband kneeing in front of her again and said in a small voice.

“Stand up, Zenjioru.”

“Eh?”

“Stand up.”

“O- Okay.”

Zenjirou had been looking up to her as he was on his knee in front of the couch, and now obediently stood up, albeit tilting his head puzzled.

This time Aura was looking up to Zenjirou.

Still sitting on the couch, she softly took the left hand of her husband in front of her, then repeated the vow.

“I promise to love and respect, to comfort and help you in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, in wealth and in poverty, until death do us part. I take this oath on this ring.”

After reciting this, she put the ring, which was a pair with the one around her finger, on his left ring finger.

“Aura…”

Surprised, Zenjirou looked dumbfounded at his wife, who was looking up to him.

He looked down. She looked up. Their eyes met.

On their first night, Aura hadn’t returned the vow when she had received the ring. Zenjirou had believed that she couldn’t respond due to surprise of experiencing that custom for the first time, but the actual reason was something different. Instead of being unable to respond, she chose not to response.

She knew that the vow was nothing but a formality, but as a Queen, she couldn’t allow herself to “love a single man until death did they part”.

She had endeavoured to deal with him sincerely. She had been prepared to develop love. And she had been prepared to grant her husband’s wishes as much as possible. However, the country, the royal family had always taken priority.

If Zenjirou were ever to become a disadvantage to the kingdom at a crucial time, she would abandon him. The marriage was supposed to be concluded with that kind of resolution. However.

(That is no longer possible. At least I will not be able to abandon him as long as he stays as he is now)

Aura told herself that at heart.

Of course that didn’t apply, when Zenjirou lost himself in power or status and became an entirely different person, but as long as that wasn’t the case, Aura was convinced that she wouldn’t make a “cold-hearted and lawful decision”.

After putting the ring onto his ring finger, Aura spread her arms upwards as to receive her husband in front of her.

Discerning her intention, Zenjirou slowly brought down his body, so that he was leaning on his wife, sitting on the couch, from above.

“….Mm.”

“…Mm.”

Their lips overlapped silently. For Zenjirou, it was the second “wedding kiss”, for Aura the first.

Although the kiss lasted a bit too long to be called a wedding kiss.

Epilogue: The Prince is Born

Time passed by.

After the rainy season, which was cloudy, but relatively cool, the western part of the South Continent welcomed its most severe season.

These three months would be “summer”, if the seasons of Japan were to be enforced here. In the last of them, temperatures of over forty degrees during the day continued naturally, not even dropping below thirty-five degrees at night. Zenjirou experienced this harsh season for the second time.

In other words, a whole year had passed since he came into this world, but right now he was in no situation to appreciate that.

“…..”

The wooden shutters of the windows in the living room of the inner palace were closed to keep out the brutal sunlight and gruelling heat even just a little bit. For a while now, Zenjirou was restlessly walking around the room without aim like a bear before hibernation, while sweating profoundly in his casual clothes.

“Zenjirou-sama, your sweat…”

A waiting maid with black hair, standing at attention on the side, took a chilled towel from the refrigerator and held it out to him as she could no longer stand on the sidelines.

“Ah… Right.”

Zenjirou only noticed that he was sweating once he was told so, and snatched the towel from the hands of the maid, then wildly wiped his face and neck.

Considering his usual behaviour, the brusque attitude of not even thanking her was rather “untypical” of him, but the waiting maid knew the circumstances behind it and actually gave her master a sympathetic look.

“Zenjirou-sama, how about you sit down and rest for a bit…”

Not only that, one of the young maids called out to him worried, even while knowing that this act was a taboo, considering their social positions.

“Oh.”

In the very moment Zenjirou was about to reply consenting.

“GUUH….!”

The voice of his beloved wife “during childbirth” sounded loudly from the bedroom.

“!”

He unconsciously flinched and swallowed his breath. Then he shook his sweating head and denied.

“Nah, I’ll stay like this after all. I wouldn’t feel comfortable sitting anyway.”

Queen Aura was giving birth today.

Just like the majority of fathers, Zenjirou could do nothing but worry to no end, so he simply continued to wander from place to place inside the room without any leeway in his mind to notice the room temperature of over forty degrees.

“Excuse me, I brought the hot water!”

“Here are the additional cloths!”

The waiting maids, carrying a large steaming pot and a bunch of clean cloths, disappeared into the bedroom with swift steps.

Zenjirou simply watched the hectic in silence. There was nothing he could do.

A cool breeze flowed into the living room through the opened door of the bedroom.

It originated from the cooling fan working at full power in front of some ice. Of course they weren't so unreasonable as to aim the cold air directly at Aura as she was in the middle of the delivery, but the temperature in the enclosed bedroom could be lowered to some extent by letting the ventilator blow air over the ice inside the room.

It was often said that a pregnant woman should not cast a chill on her body, but it was still better for the body than a room with a temperature over forty degrees.

No matter how much stamina Aura had, her mind and body would exhaust during the long period of the delivery amidst a heat of over forty degrees.

Besides, the ventilator on the highest speed didn't lower the temperature to an extreme to begin with. Down to thirty degrees at best.

The heat in the living room was just so terrific that these approximate thirty degrees seemed "cool".

"Shit, what a blunder. I have to figure out a way to install the air conditioning in the bedroom until the next delivery."

While aimlessly wandering over the carpet in the living room, Zenjirou mumbled in a voice so small that no one could hear it.

Considering the unsuited bedroom size of around fifty square metre and the lack of air sealing due to windows and door, which was nowhere near the air sealing in houses in modern Japan, the temperature might not get lowered as much as hoped-for, but it was still better than nothing.

"Ah, but before that, it's more important to learn the 'teleportation' magic first. Because if I could use it, a person from the Jilbell Family would be here now."

In his daily lessons, Zenjirou had already succeed at activating a simple magic numerous times, but it was obvious that it would still take time until he could use the "teleportation" magic as freely as Aura.

Be it the setup of the air conditioning or the mastering of the "teleportation" magic, both were something for the future. At the present time, there was barely anything he could contribute.

His only role was to order that the "Imbued Stone of Cure" was used on Aura, if she and the child should get into a life-threatening condition, but that was something he didn't want to happen, if possible.

"Hah…"

He leaked a sigh for the nth time.

"Zenjirou-sama, some water."

As he kept sweating, a waiting maid worried about him, took a jar with water from the refrigerator, poured some into a glass and held it out to him.

"Oh, thanks."

Zenjirou downed the chilled water in one gulp and felt how he started to sweat all over his body again. After wiping the sweat on his face and neck with the towel he had gotten from a waiting maid earlier, and regaining a bit of his presence of mind, he now called out to the waiting maids considerately, as he suddenly thought of it.

"All of you, watch your own condition, too. You can help yourself to the towels or water in the fridge."

"Yes, thank you very much."

"Thank you for your consideration."

For the first time today, he had uttered caring words towards the maids. The waiting maids smiled naturally, but he still wasn't composed enough yet to notice that.

He started to walk around the room nervously again.

Scratched his head unconsciously.

Sighed.

Then started to walk around again.

The presence of mind he had regained from gulping down that cold water, disappeared again in no time.

“Aw, damn. Is it not time yet…?”

In the end, his emotionally instable behaviour continued until the moment when the healthy “first cry” of the baby resounded from the bedroom.

* * *

Queen Aura safely gave birth to her first child.

With Doctor Michelle’s permission, Zenjirou entered the bedroom, where his beloved wife Aura showed the brightest smile ever on her exhausted face from atop the bed.

She was currently lying on the small extra bed, which was added for Zenjirou to sleep in after shehad became pregnant, instead of the original huge bed of the bedroom. The bed in which Zenjirou usually slept.

Doctor Michelle or the assisting waiting maids wouldn’t be able to lend a hand if Aura was on the giant bed and they stood at the side of it, so they took it upon themselves to perform the delivery on this bed instead.

“Aura!”

“Oh, Zenjirou…”

Zenjirou was rushing over to her, whereat Aura raised her head a bit from the pillow and faintly smiled at him. Her brown face and red hair were dripping wet from sweat, which was the complete opposite of her usual vigorous self.

“Stay as you are. No need to force yourself to look at me.”

Aura looked so worn out that Zenjirou unconsciously prompted her like that after rushing to her side. However, her worn-out face showed a smile of satisfaction.

“Yeah, okay. But it is alright. Look, the child and I are well.”

Following her look, which was slowly going to the side, Zenjirou looked at the waiting maid, who was standing on the other side of the bed.

The clean-limbed waiting maid pressed the baby wrapped in a fine red cloth to her breast.

“That’s…?”

“Yes. My— our child.”

“My child…”

Zenjirou timidly peeked at the face of the baby in the arms of the clean-limbed maid.

The waiting maid, acquainted with him, showed a friendly smile all over her face and held the baby in her arms a bit into his direction, so that he could get a better look.

“Take a look, Zenjirou-sama. It is a healthy boy.”

“Oh, a boy.”

He went around the bed, moving to the side of the maid with the baby. Then he took another look at his own child in the arms of the waiting maid.

“He has my eyes.”

“Yes. But he got the mouth of Zenjirou-sama, if I had to choose.”

“His skin colour is a mixture of my husband’s and mine. A bit pale for a child of the Carpa Kingdom.”

Aura and the middle-aged maid, holding the baby, were saying all that, but to be honest, Zenjirou couldn’t approve of it at all.

Were they really saying that this creature, looking like a limp monkey without hair and closed eyes, resembled Aura and him? Its skin was bright red, too, so he saw nil resemblances to Aura or himself.

And above all, his “eyes” were currently focused on something else than the outward characteristics.

(Wow. His magic power’s above Aura’s. Maybe twice as much as mine?)

After diligently taking magic lessons from Lady Octavia for around one year, Zenjirou had now awakened the basic of basics for a magician, namely the “ability to detect magic power”. His eyes captured the dazzlingly overwhelming magic power coming from the body of his son.

One’s amount of magic power was decided upon birth, so it wasn’t strange that a newborn baby happened to have more magic power than a grown royalty. However, Zenjirou couldn’t help but feel an indescribable uneasiness when this small, limp creature, from which he didn’t know whether it was a human or a monkey, emitted such an incredible magic power.

He timidly reached out his hand for the child in the arms of the waiting maid.

The moment he was about to carefully touch the baby’s bright red hand with the forefinger of his right hand, the newborn tightly squeezed his finger with its small hand.

“!? Uwah, he squeezed me!”

His finger was squeezed.

Did he felt so deeply moved from that simple action because this small hand belonged to his own flesh and blood?

“Wow. He’s so small, but properly has five fingers…”

“It would be scary if he had not. Fingers are not something that grow later on after all.”

The middle-aged waiting maid answered like that with a smile while she held the baby in an accustomed manner, supporting the neck, which it still couldn’t hold up on his own.

Queen Aura, still laying on the bed, smiled in response to the almost childish reaction of her husband towards his newborn child.

“Fufu, cute, is he not?”

“…Yeah, quite so. The cutest in the world.”

Zenjirou forgot all about his earlier rude impression that he looked “like a monkey”, and nodded numerous times while he kept looking at his child squeezing his finger.

“Aa, Daa, Aa!”

“Oh my, there, there.”

As to comfort the baby, who started to cry, the middle-aged maid quickly dandled him gently.

Just when Zenjirou withdrew his squeezed finger from the baby, Doctor Michelle, who had carried out the delivery today, raised a voice from the side.

“Zenjirou-sama, let me congratulate you first of all. As you can see, both Her Highness and the prince are safe and sound.”

Upon these words, Zenjirou realized that he still hadn’t thanked the doctor for ensuring the lives of his precious wife and son. Flustered, he turned around in a snap.

“Yes, thank you, Doctor Michelle. It is thanks to you that Aura and my child got through the delivery without problems. I cannot thank you enough.”

Zenjirou forgot his position and lowered his head in a servile manner while fully speaking in a respective tone, whereat Doctor Michelle widened his eyes in surprise for a moment, but apparently decided not to mind it right now.

“Your words are wasted on me.”

The doctor immediately showed his usual calm smile and answered like that.

“Nevertheless, the delivery was quite exhausting for Her Highness Aura. I recommend to stay in bed for today. Have at least two waiting maids accompany you for relieving yourself.”

“Yeah, got it.”

Queen Aura shortly affirmed the words of the royal physician from atop her bed.

While his wife and the doctor exchanged such a post-delivery conversation, Zenjirou nervously called out to the elderly waiting maid holding the baby.

“Uh- Uhm, I would like to hold him, too… Can I?”

The waiting maid widened her eyes in surprise for a moment upon the words from the new father, but in the next moment, she smiled sweetly and nodded firmly.

“Yes, of course. But please be careful. The child still cannot support its own head, so please do not forget to hold it like this under any circumstances.”

“Yeah, okay. Oof, like this?”

He nervously held his newborn son in both his arms.

“Uwah…”

The small and soft body weight, adjacent to fragile, was transmitted onto his arms. He properly felt the pulsation of “life” when he held that puniness, which was almost a miracle to be unharmed, in his arms.

“Fufu, how nice. Papa is already holding you.”

The Queen threw her husband a smile from the bed as he held their child awkwardly, raised her sweaty head a bit and looked at the waiting maids standing at attention left and right.

“I want to sit up. Help me.”

“Very well. Ah, but, Michelle-sama?”

The aged doctor mused for a moment when the young waiting maid looked at him for permission, then nodded slowly.

“Should be alright. I will allow to sit on the bed for a short while at least.”

After getting the doctor’s permission, the waiting maids immediately implemented their Queen’s order.

“Excuse us then, Your Highness.”

“We will put our arms behind your back, so please lean against them.”

“Allow me to reach behind you. I will place a cushion there, so please leaned against the headboard afterwards.”

Two waiting maids skilfully sat Aura up on the bed while another waiting maid placed a big pillow at the headboard of the bed.

“Fuh…”

Aura was sat up by the waiting maids like a doll and leaned against the pillow at the headboard, leaking a big sigh.

Beads of sweat were dropping from her drenched face and neck, flowing into her cleavage or over her collarbone.

“Your Highness, I will wipe your body.”

“Yes, thanks.”

As the young waiting maid diligently wiped her royal body with a cold towel, Aura narrowed her eyes to slits like a cat tickled under the chin and thanked her.

The wrung, wet towel felt really good on her body, which was blazing hot from the severe heat and the struggle of the delivery, so Aura abandoned herself to the hands of the waiting maids.

Zenjirou said down in a chair next to the bed with the utmost care as to prevent anything from happen to the child in his arms.

"…All done and dusted."

Her husband suddenly broached a topic, whereat Aura turned to him after having her sweat wiped, and nodded curt.

"Yes, for now."

A conversation between the wife, accomplishing the delivery just now, and the husband, holding their newborn child in his arms.

"….."

"….."

As if they had agreed upon it beforehand, the doctor and waiting maids considerately kept silent and wordlessly retreated to the back all together as not to disturb them.

Whether the Queen realized their thoughtfulness or not, she kept talking in a manner as if their family of three were the only ones here.

"At first, I considered the pregnancy and birth as a part of my duties as the Queen, but after seeing my child with my own eyes, holding it with my own arms… somehow, all of this superficial reasoning was just blown away."

Aura's gaze was fixated on the small, sleeping baby in her husband's arms while she muttered that.

Zenjirou, too, looked down on the child in his arms and agreed with a broad smile.

The Queen and the Prince Consort. The couple was supposed to be all lovey-dovey, but now the two of them had only eyes for their newborn child, not even looking each other in the face.

"Yeah, he's so cute."

"Yes, adorably so. Now I truly regret the absolute necessary to raise a prince amongst foster siblings by a wet nurse."

If she were to raise him herself, she would likely end up spoiling him to no end, neglecting a proper education as royalty.

Zenjirou looked into her eyes after she confessed that and snorted with laughter.

"That's for sure. I doubt I could raise him with the necessary strictness, too."

He would have never imagined that having a child was something so precious.

"Come to think of it, what name are you going to give him?"

"Mh? Aren't you going to give him one, Aura? I don't know much about the names here."

Zenjirou tilted his head puzzled towards Aura's sudden topic chance, and answered.

"Yes, of course I am going to give him one. However, our country has a custom, where the child is given one name from each country when the parents origin from different ones. Although it is quite rare to have a royalty with two names, due to issues with a leak of bloodline magic."

Aura said so, whereat Zenjirou nodded understanding.

"Oho, I see. Then I'll think of a name, too."

If he had known that before, he would have downloaded an electronic name dictionary onto his computer. Zenjirou regretted it a bit now. But oh well. His brain should at least be able to come up with a suitable name for his own child.

As Aura had perceived her husband's intention, she giggled from atop her pillow.

"Kukuku, good. Each of us shall think hard and give him a good name."

But since she was laughing and speaking at the same time, her voice became a bit cracked at the end of the sentence and she coughed. Hearing that, Zenjirou looked worried at his beloved wife.

“Yeah, will do. But you’ve got to rest now, Aura. Doctor Michelle also said it’s not good to be up for too long.”

The aged doctor, standing in the back, expressed his agreement by nodding to his words. Due to their social standing, the waiting maids weren’t saying anything, but they looked pretty worried at her, too.

The Queen gave this situation a wry smile and shrugged her shoulders a bit.

“Fine, I get it. But a little bit, just a little bit longer should be alright, no? I want to look at him a bit longer, so that I will still see him in my dream once I fall asleep…”

“Geez… Okay, but just a bit.”

Zenjirou could relate to her feelings better than anyone, so he allowed it with a wry smile.

“Yes, I know.”

The Queen replied commendable with a smile, nodding obediently.

In the end however, she couldn’t keep her promise.

The father held the child and the mother watched the two from atop the bed. Without getting tired of it, she continued to watch her newborn child until Doctor Michelle, overseeing everything, finally intervened.

Extra Chapter: The Collaboration between the Waiting Maids and their Master

Vanessa was a waiting maid working in the inner palace of the Carpa Kingdom.

That said, she was not the kind of cute maid with an elegant appearance that one would expect in the “royal palace”.

As a woman of middle age, her waist and bottom had put on an impressive plump weight.

It goes without saying that an enclosed environment like the inner palace could not be run by young and beautiful girls alone.

Starting with the supervisory maid Amanda through to each department head, all of them were expert in their respective fields through years of experience.

A large working force of young girls that was primarily chosen for their appearance, and a selected few skilled leaders with an emphasis on abilities. Vanessa belonged to the latter group.

“Head of the cooking department in the inner palace”. That was her current position.

Nevertheless, she still wasn’t an official royal cook, despite her title.

The official royal cooks were the men working in the palace and the food for Queen Aura and Zenjirou, living in the inner palace, was basically made by them.

Needless to say, it would be quite inefficient when the cooks in the palace prepared all their food for each meal and had the waiting maids carry it into the inner palace every day.

Therefore, the royal cook were in charge of staple food like bread or upscale main dishes, while Vanessa and her girls often prepared simple dishes in the kitchen of the inner palace.

The kitchen in the inner palace was small, but its equipment was in no way inferior to the one in the palace. Likewise, Vanessa’s skills as a cook weren’t all that behind the royal cooks.

In spite of that, Vanessa had no chance to become a royal cook as a woman, since the cooking sector was no exception to the customs of the patriarchal Carpa Kingdom.

For all these circumstances, Vanessa, a waiting maid in the inner palace and the “head of the cooking department”, was working as the practical head chef every day.

“Okay, girls, it’s time to make the sweets you love so much. Let’s give it our all!”

“Yes!

With both her hands on her plump hips, Vanessa raised a loud voice, whereupon the three young waiting maids on cooking duty today replied energetically all together.

Unlike the department heads, who each had their permanent position, the workers aka young waiting maids went through a rotation, where they alternated between all the departments for a set interval.

This was done, so that the young waiting maid evenly learned the maid skills and could be send out to support other departments when there were sudden absentees or when a certain department needed help on a special occasion (in fact, tasks like the monthly “great cleaning of the bath” or the “throughout cultivation of the garden after the rainy season” were done by all waiting maids of the inner palace together).

Vanessa showed a bright smile on her chubby face upon the quick answer from the young waiting maids, then clapped her hands.

“Good. Then let’s get started!”

To be honest, Vanessa’s speech and conduct was a little bit different from a typical “maid in the inner palace”. Frankly, she lacked “grace”.

Of course she acted in a gracious manner, which you would never expect from her plump body, in front of Zenjirou and Aura, but when she was working behind closed doors, where no higher-ups saw her, like today, she was just like an old lady from a tavern in downtown.

So much so that some of the young waiting maids from a good lineage felt a bit uncomfortable around her.

However, the three maids assigned to the kitchen today were hardly concerned about that.

Fay, Dolores and Rethe were on cooking duty today. The so-called "three troublemakers".

Vanessa gave the young waiting maids instructions with a clear voice.

"Fay, you take care of the stove. Watch the fire, so that it has the right temperature!"

"Yes!"

"Dolores, you sift the flour on the table!"

"Yes, understood."

"Rethe, we two are beating the eggs. I'll do the egg yolk, you do the egg white."

"Ui, I got the toughest job."

The young maids scattered on Vanessa's orders.

Sieved wheat flour, egg yolk whipped foamy and meringue (meaning egg white whipped until it stood up in stiff peaks). As well as baking soda grinded to powder. Apart from that, there were brown sugar and vegetable oil of fine quality provided on the table.

One might be able to guess what they were going to make from these ingredients.

They were making a "sponge cake" right now.

Needless to say, the sweet called "sponge cake" originally didn't exist in the Carpa Kingdom, so the recipe obviously came from Zenjirou.

When he came into the different world, he had brought receipts for sweets or snacks to have with alcohol, downloaded at random, along.

That said, about eighty percent of these recipes couldn't be carried out in this world. The reason was extremely simple: Most of the western confectionery from his world required dairy products like milk or butter.

Since the livestock in the Carpa Kingdom consisted mainly of dragons— namely large reptiles, there was no animal that gave milk. The North Continent apparently had livestock like goats or cows, so it was no impossible task to import and breed them through the investment of a lot of money, but to be honest, it remained questionable if it was acceptable to spend such a large sum simply for an indulgence of his.

After all, the people of the Carpa Kingdom had managed hundreds of years without dairy products. They would surely meet butter or cheese with reluctance at first. In fact, Aura had tilted her head with a rather averse expression, saying "eating the milk of animals…?", when Zenjirou had told her about it.

Due to these circumstances, the food reproduced here so far was limited to stuff without dairy products.

And one sweet without dairy products was the "sponge cake", which Vanessa and the other girls were making right now.

Of course there were also sponge cakes, which used dairy products, like "milk sponge cakes" or "butter sponge cakes", but the sponge cake recipe in Zenjirou's recipe collection was for one without dairy products.

Eggs, bread flour, sugar and salad oil. These were the only ingredients listed on the recipe.

Admittedly, Vanessa and the others weren't making the their "sponge cake" according to that recipe.

They had no refined oil such as salad oil, so they substituted it with an vegetable oil as indistinctive as possible, but even so, the smell of the oil was rather strong, so they added a little bit of the brandy Zenjirou had brought along, as flavouring.

Moreover, in the recipe, it was leavened by the meringue alone, but so far it often failed to do so, so they added some natural sodium bicarbonate (fine powder of the trona mineral) as baking powder.

These alternations ultimately manifested in the taste and appearance, resulting in something “different” from the recipe.

Although it was “different”, Vanessa had improved the recipe with her skills on par with the royal cooks, through trial and error. The faint smell of brandy and shallow taste of alcohol might make this cake more delicious than the original one for some people.

“Dum Di Dum~♪“

Vanessa held a large, silver bowl in her corpulent right arm and cheerfully continued to beat the many egg yolks with the whisk in her left hand.

She was used to “whipping the eggs”, since that cooking method was known here, too.

Moreover, she looked at the young waiting maids and coordinated the whole procedure while judging the foaming of the eggs through her sense of touch.

“Hey, we can fold in the meringue any moment now. Are you done, Rethe?”

While skilfully adding the brown sugar, ready to hand near the bowl, to the yolks, Vanessa called out to the waiting maid with big breasts and drooping eyelids, who worked hard at making the meringue by thrusting the whisk into the bowl with the egg white, making a bright red face next to her.

“Okay~ I’m done in a bit~”

The waiting maid with the dropping eyelids— Rethe answered her superior like that with a voice that was completely exhausted after such a short time already.

Unlike the egg yolk, which only had to be whipped until it slightly foamed, the egg white had to be whipped until stiff peaks stood up— Making the meringue was a stiff job.

So much so that even Fay, sweating a waterfall in front of the stove, and Dolores, sieving a large amount of flour with a floury face, unconsciously gave their roommate sympathetic glances.

Rethe stirred the whisk with trembling movements of her whole body and praiseworthy fulfilled her task regardless.

“Good, bring it over as soon as you’re done. Fay! How’s the fire?”

“Looking good. Ready at any time!”

The petite maid in front of the stove with ash on her apron and face, stuck out her small thumb in the air with a sweet smile.

“Good. Then let’s get started for real. Dolores, I take it you’re done with sieving the flour? Good, then oil the tin and choose what to add to the base.”

“Eh? I’m allowed to choose?”

In response to Vanessa’s instruction, the tall maid happily straightened her usual slant-eyes and showed a bright smile.

The original recipe intended for granulated sugar, but Vanessa had tried out various ideas so far: Adding ground nuts, slices of dried fruits and whatnot instead.

Basically, Dolores was entrusted with the most important task, namely deciding the flavour of the sponge cake. Unsurprisingly, she was thrilled.

“Aw, not fair.”

“Dolores-chan, choose the granulated sugar. That’s the best!”

Fay at the stove and Rethe making the meringue both raised a voice without a moment’s delay.

After all, the waiting maids of the kitchen were allowed to “appropriately dispose” of whatever remained after Zenjirou and Aura got the good pieces of the baked sweets, so that matter concerned them as well.

Vanessa rebuked these boisterous maids while she added the vegetable oil bit by bit to the bowl with the egg yolk.

“Hey! Enough with the ruckus. Focus on your job. Dolores, pick one already. It will be a disgrace for us when the sweets for our masters are delayed because you were hesitant.”

Compared to supervisory maid Amanda or cleaning department head Ines, Vanessa didn’t nag as much, but she didn’t forget her position as the cooking department head.

“Ye~s!”

“I’m sorry, Vanessa-sama.”

“So~rry.”

The three troublemakers shrugged her shoulders together towards the scolding of their supervisor.

Approximately one hour later.

A sweet fragrance hang over the kitchen.

Needless to say, this fragrance came from the freshly baked sponge cake.

Vanessa skilfully cut into the sponge cake, removed from the metal tin, with a bread knife.

The troublemaking trio intently watched her while leaning over the table from their chairs.

“…..”

“…..”

“…..”

Undaunted by the pressuring looks of the trio, resembling the eyes of a carnivorous dragon that found some prey after three days without food, on the cake, Vanessa neatly cut the sponge cake in three equal pieces.

“Okay, from here to here… And from here to here, I guess.”

She chose the best parts from the cut cake and apportioned them onto silver plates.

As the primitive stove was sadly fuelled by firewood after all, Vanessa could do nothing about the irregular surface baking, even with all her skills. Therefore, she baked it tolerantly, anticipating a certain level of failure from the beginning, and only presented the well-baked portions to her masters.

With her carefree slant-eyes, Rethe watched how Vanessa portioned Zenjirou’s share on the silver plate and remarked with a serious tone, which was rarely heard from her under normal circumstances.

“Ah, Vanessa-sama, the surface of this piece is deformed. I don’t think we should serve this to Zenjirou-sama.”

The sponge cake in question was the “piece with the most granulated sugar”.

Influenced by Rethe, Dolores and Fay also mentioned their own desire veiled in consideration for their master next.

“Vanessa-sama, please take a close look. This piece has small flour lumps on it. As a waiting maid in charge of the kitchen, I cannot allow this to be brought to Zenjirou-sama.”

Assuming an affected serious look, Dolores indicated and pointed at the portion, which had best looking crust.

“Vanessa-sama, Vanessa-sama, the piece on the side! It’s cut a bit skewed! I’ll take responsibility and dispose of it myself!”

Fay said so energetically as if she was going to jump to her feet, and had set her sight onto a slice that was cut a little bit thicker.

“…..”

Speechless on a rare occasion, Vanessa stared at the “three troublemakers”, who were faithful to their desires, with half-closed eyes.

By the time the girls thought “uh oh, not good”, it was already too late.

“Haaah…!”

Vanessa, still not saying anything, hotly breathed on her tightly clenched fist and

“You fools!”

“Agh!”

“Ow!”

“Hyahn!?”

swung the heated fist down on the heads of the troublemakers one by one.

* * *

Afterwards, Fay, Dolores and Rethe delivered the best pieces of the sponge cake to Zenjirou in the living room and returned to the kitchen.

“We’re back!”

“We’ve served the sponge cake to Zenjirou-sama.”

“He said it was delicious and lets you know ‘thanks as always’, Vanessa-sama.”

The damage from Vanessa’s fist was no longer visible in their energetic behaviour as they called out.

Well, she had hit them without reservation, precisely because these three were mentally tough and quick to recover, but the girls themselves weren’t aware of that causal connection.

Remaining seated on the chair at the cooking table, Vanessa welcomed the young maids with a bright smile.

“Yes, well done. I’ll make some tea now, so take a break. Here, you can each pick one piece at will.”

“Yahoo!”

“Thank you very much.”

“Yay! Let’s see, let’s see.”

The troublemaking trio happily sat down at the table and carefully investigated each slice of the remaining cake with utmost devotion to find their favourite.

Technically, there was plenty of the cake left, but the waiting maids working in the other departments would resent them if they didn’t share, so the girls could only have one slice each.

Just as the three waiting maids had put their chosen pieces onto their plates, Vanessa had made tea for four people and placed the steamy cups in front of the young maids and herself.

The plate for the cake and the cups for the tea were all made of wood. As this country didn’t know of glass or ceramics, the tableware was basically either made of silver or wood.

“Here, your tea. It’s still hot, so be careful not to burn your tongue.”

“Thank you, Vanessa-sama!”

“Yay. Ah, Fay-chan, pass me the sugar.”

“Wait a sec, Rethe. You finally get to eat some sponge cake, so when you put in so much sugar into your tea, you won’t notice the sweetness of the cake anymore.”

“There’s no point in telling her that, Dolores. Rethe takes lot of sugar to anything after all.”

“Ehehe…”

The tea party proceeded with a harmonious atmosphere.

Although they were in front of their superior Vanessa, Fay and the other two enjoyed the tea and cake without any tension. In a way, they had nerves of steel.

Supervisory maid Amanda stressed rules and hierarchy, so she would lament this scene as “unacceptable”, but Vanessa was the laxest amongst the supervisors in regards to rules.

If anything, she rather liked an harmonious atmosphere like this.

“Come to think of it, Dolores, are the papers you brought the usual again?”

Having finished her own piece of the cake, Vanessa rinsed the sweetness in her mouth with the tea in the wooden cup and called out like that to the tall waiting maid, who was still eating the cake little by little across of her.

“Ah, yes. That’s right. It’s the ‘next recipe’ from Zenjirou-sama.”

Upon her superior’s question, Dolores removed the wooden fork from her mouth and quickly swallowed the cake in her mouth, then responded.

Zenjirou translated the recipes from the collection on his computer into the language of this world at odd moments and passed them on to the waiting maids in charge of cooking.

Of course he had Aura check the translation before handing them to the maids, so there were no fatal mistakes that distorted the meaning.

“Ehehe, what’s it going to be this time? I’m all excited.”

Amongst all the many waiting maids, Rethe was probably the one, who was the most fascinated by the sweets from the other world. Her face with the drooping eyelids was slack to begin with, but a soft smile relaxed it even more and her consciousness was already focussed on the unknown sweet.

Naturally, Fay and Dolores, too, were looking forward to “reproduce the recipe”, albeit not as much as Rethe.

“We’re counting on you, Rethe.”

“Geez, Fay. This concerns you as well! Sure, Rethe is the best cook, but you just can’t leave it all to her because of that. You, as well as me, have to give our best, too!”

The tall waiting maid, holding a wooden cup in her left hand, gave her petite coworker, who openly spoke about relying upon others for her own goal, an elbow check with her right.

“Oww! Aw, stop it! You may be skinny, but in exchange your elbow is pointy and hurts!”

“Shuddap. As if you can talk, shorty!”

“Who’re you calling a shorty, you mountain!”

“Jeez, watch yourself, Fay-chan, Dolores-chan. We’re having a delicious cake here, so keep it quiet.”

Fay and Dolores were having an intimate fight as always, to which Rethe raised a troubled and angry voice.

She knew better than anyone that their fights were hardly genuine, but the ruckus during her favourite sweets time was definitely a bother.

Vanessa said while watching these “three troublemakers” with a wry smile.

“Well, keep it in moderation. My patience has its limit, too, you know. Anyway, when do you girls want to challenge that recipe?”

Needless to say, they had no time to spare to make new sweets on days with their normal duties. Making three meals and the usual afternoon sweets wore away all of their energy.

“Hmm…”

“That much is clear.”

“We want to make it in three days. If I remember rightly, Her Highness Aura and Zenjirou-sama are away on business during the day and attend a party at night, so they’ll only eat breakfast in the inner palace.”

Stopping their fight at once, Fay and Dolores looked at each other and said so deeply recalling from their memories.

Even if the waiting maids were working in the inner palace, they had memorized the entire official schedule of their masters.

As the answers from the girls were satisfiable, Vanessa nodded firmly, but then showed a sly smile and added.

“That’s true. However, the head cook from the palace requested my help for that night party. Apparently Zenjioru-sama mentioned that I know his tastes the best.”

Vanessa was shaking her plump body with laughter, saying “It’s quite an honour”.

But the three troublemakers didn’t feel like smiling after being told that.

“Ehh!?”

Fay raised an excessive surprised voice.

“You won’t be here, Vanessa-sama?”

Dolores inclined her head to the side in worry to her words.

“Eh? Then we can’t make the new sweet?”

And Rethe made a sorrowful face, wrinkling the space between her eyebrows as if she was about to cry.

That figures. Even if Rethe adorned herself with having the best cooking skills amongst the young waiting maids, she was nothing more than a “waiting maid good at cooking”.

She didn’t hold a candle to Vanessa, whose “cooking skills went beyond the maid level”.

As a matter of course, Vanessa had coordinated all the attempts to reproduce Zenjirou’s recipes so far.

“Th- Then how about the noon in seven days? There won’t be a night party on that day, but Zenjirou-sama and Her Highness Aura will both be gone during the day. We would’ve less time than in three days, but still…”

Quickly going through the schedule in her head, Dolores made a suggestion, but Vanessa shrugged her shoulders with an ever so slightly affected expression.

“Well, if that’s alright with you, I don’t mind doing it in seven days. Shall I give the recipe to Karina then?”

Karina was the name of a young waiting maid and the coworker of Fay and the other girls.

The three girls came to a realization at the same time upon Vanessa’s interjection.

“Ah!?”

“Right, it’s too late in seven days. We’ve to do it before.”

“We’re going to change departments in five days!”

The young waiting maids periodically changed departments.

The next change was already due in five days. As the three realized that fact, they were at their wits’ end.

In other words, they would still be in charge if they tried the new recipe in three days, but in seven days the waiting maids that relieved them of their kitchen duty would be in charge.

Vanessa looked at the three, young waiting maids and shrugged her shoulders in a dramatic manner, shaking her head excessively.

“What a shame. And I here I was planning to use my authority to reward the first team that pulled this new recipe off, with one month of exclusive usage of the refrigerator.”

The huge five-door refrigerator in the living room naturally belonged to Zenjirou, but as the head of the cooking department, Vanessa had gotten the permission to freely use around one-third of the entire space, starting from the crisper, at her own discretion.

The troublemaking trio became all excited from hearing these words.

The Carpa Kingdom was still in the hot season. Zenjirou allowed the waiting maids to help themselves to the chilled towels and the jug with cold water in the refrigerator or the ice from the freezer to some extent, but there were more than a dozen waiting maids in total in the inner palace after all.

The cold water and ice, let alone the chilled towels, couldn’t be taken by everyone as they pleased.

Thus the exclusive usage of the refrigerator, if only in a limited small space, was quite attractive to the waiting maids.

“…..!”

“…..”

“…..”

Fay, Dolores and Rethe communicated with their eyes, then

“Vanessa-sama!”

“Please leave it to us!”

“We’ll somehow pull off this recipe with just the three of us in three days!”

they declared reassuring all in one breath.

* * *

Three days later at noon.

The “three troublemakers”: Fay, Dolores and Rethe had gathered in the kitchen of the inner palace, where they were all alone.

Needless to say, they were dressed ready to cook: A long apron over their maid clothes.

Fay’s short hair was kept like always, but Dolores and Rethe’s long hair was tied back into a bun, so it wouldn’t get in the way with cooking.

Fay and the other two had declared that they would somehow pull of the recipe by themselves.

Vanessa had most likely tried to steer the matter into that direction from the very beginning.

The face of their supervisor had shown an “all-according-to-plan” smile as she answered them with “okay. Give it your all. I’ll arrange for the ingredients, so use anything you need”.

The young waiting maids challenged the new sweet recipe all by themselves. They themselves were probably not aware of it, but it was good practice for them.

For Vanessa, who was functioning as an teacher as well, it was a welcome outcome when the young waiting maid improved their cooking skills through this.

“Good, let’s get started!”

Rethe clapped her hands in front of her voluptuous breasts and proclaimed the kick-off.

“Okay, you’re the leader today, Rethe. Please give us instructions. Fay and I will do as you tell us then.”

“We’re counting on you, Leader!”

Rethe acted as if she was rolling up her sleeves and replied to her two roommates or rather co-workers.

“Yeah, I’ll do my best. I hope you two memorized the recipe.”

“Of course. I read it so often in the last three days that I can’t bear the sight of it anymore.”

In reaction to Rethe’s inquiry, Dolores waved with the couple of copy papers, which had gotten a bit more worn out, dirtied and buckled compared to three days ago, and answered.

“I, I remember… it, too?”

Fay’s answer remained a bit doubtful, since it ended with a question mark, but it was too late to do anything about it now.

“Jeez, Fay-chan. I’ll have to trust you on that. Well then, we’ll start by making the ‘puff pastry’ first.”

Rethe puckered her lips on a rare occasion and said that, then reached out for the ingredients on the worktop herself as the vanguard.

The new recipe from Zenjirou was a “puff pastry pie”, just like one could imagine from the term “puff pastry”.

That said, it wasn’t a regular pastry. The traditional puff pastry required butter to be folded inside the many layers of the laminated dough, so it was impossible to prepare in the Carpa Kingdom, since they had no dairy products.

The recipe Zenjirou had translated this time was a “low-calorie pastry”, which included vegetable oil instead of butter.

The sweet was a recently popular diet variety, but it was much appreciated in this world without dairy products it.

“Uhn, uhn…”

Without delay, Rethe added a bit of salt to the wheat flour and kneaded it with water like it was written on the recipe.

The three of them each attempted to make their own puff pastry, since they expected to fail at the first try anyway.

The three waiting maids were used to kneading dough from making other sweets or bread and made the puff pastry in a relatively accustomed manner.

However, it was obvious that Rethe was more skilful from watching their techniques.

“Ah, Fay-chan, I think you’re kneading too much? The recipe says you only need to knead it until it’s crumbly.”

“Eh? No way? Mine’s already tough?”

“Idiot. That happens when you don’t read the recipe carefully.”

While continuing her own work, Rethe still had the leisure to point out the failure of her co-worker. That showed how advanced her cooking skills were.

“Okay, this should do. Fay-chan, Dolores-chan, are you done, too? If you are, then smear oil on the surface of the dough, fold it and spread it evenly. Once you‘ve done so, smear oil on it, fold and spread it again. Repeat that three times.”

“Roger!”

“Uwah, it’s quite exhausting. With my luck, I’ll have the oil all over my body later.”

Dolores said so with a sigh while she wiped the sweat from her forehead with the hand towel prepared at the side.

The stove in the kitchen was already fired as not to waste any time, so the room was filled with hot air.

“We need to stop the sweat.”

“Yeah, gotta be careful.”

“Or it’ll turn out salty.”

The three maids eagerly wrapped a cloth around their head to collect the sweat and resumed the kneading with regained vigour.

Several minutes later.

Three puff pastries were on show on top of the worktop.

“Good, all done. Now we only have to decide what to put in. I favour candied apricots.”

Rethe smiled softly with a few strands of hair pasted over her face as they had broken away from the rolled up hair dumpling.

“Hmm, I like it simple, so I will go with desert bananas, I guess?”

“I… Hmm, I don’t really need to put in anything, do I? That works, too, doesn’t it? I’ll try baking it after smearing oil with dissolved sugar onto it.”

Dolores and Fay likewise mused about what to put into their own puff pastry.

When all is said and done, the young waiting maids loved sweet stuff. As no superior was around, they chatted boisterous while they prepared the pastry with their respective favourite ingredient.

“Okay, done!”

Raising her hands, Rethe showed a satisfied smile, whereat Fay tilted her head puzzled and asked.

“Ah, but for how long do we bake them? Vanessa-sama usually takes care of that.”

The primitive stove obviously had no thermostat and measuring the baking time by feeling alone was no easy task.

Rethe’s cooking skills were considered top class amongst the young waiting maids, but she still couldn’t do this.

However, Dolores showed a fearless smile to blow off Fay’s worry.

“Fufuhn~ I got that covered. Here, I borrowed it from Zenjirou-sama yesterday!”

Saying so, Dolores took out the foldable and black “game console” from the pocket of her maid clothes.

Recently, she had spent her breaks with an addiction to the portable console, so she now opened and operated the game console with smooth movements.

“I think it goes like this… Yes, that’s it, the clock!”

The girls had mastered the reading of the Latin alphabet at some point while playing with the game console and even understood the division of time, twenty-four hours – sixty minutes – sixty seconds, from the other world (apparently they learned it through the time attack in a racing game).

“On the recipe it says to heat it for forty minutes at two-hundred degrees, right? With this, even we can measure the baking time accurately.”

Throwing out her small chest, Dolores claimed proudly, whereupon Rethe clapped with a soft smile.

“Wow, you’re amazing, Dolores-chan! Now the time’s no problem. But what about the temperature? Even if the time’s accurate, it’ll be no good when the heat is wrong, won’t it? I wonder how hot two-hundred degrees are.”

“Uhh…”

Fay immediately retorted to the quailing Dolores.

“Jeez, got it covered, my foot! That’s so typical of you, Dolores.”

“O, Oh come on! At least we won’t mistake the time with it. It’ll be useful, probably!”

Dolores objected to Fay’s teasing with a flushed face, but she actually was by no means wrong.

Even when the factor of the temperature remained uncertain, the merit of accurately measuring time couldn’t be overlooked so easily.

Besides, it was much easier to try again with a clock when they failed the first time.

For example, they would just have to bake it for five minutes longer when the forty minutes weren’t enough. In comparison, they would’ve to rely on their biological clock, “a bit longer than just now”, when they had no clock.

It should be easily imaginable how difficult that was.

“Geez, Fay-chan, Dolores-chan, leave the fighting for later. Time to put them into the stove now.”

Rethe puffed up her full cheeks and showed an angry expression that wasn’t the least bit scary.

Forty minutes later.

On top of the worktop stood the three “pseudo pastries” fresh out of the oven.

Yes, “pseudo pastries”, not real “pastries”. At least it would be an insult to all pastry cooks, who had shaped the history of sweets, by calling these black something a “pastry”.

"….Haah."

"Pitch-black…"

Giving her roommates, who dropped their shoulders disappointed, a side-glance, Rethe, the only one with the usual beatific expression, took the kitchen knife and cut into the "pseudo pastry".

She roughly cut up the still steaming mass, skilfully scrapping off the burned parts with the tip of the knife.

After somehow salvaging the still eatable pieces, she put them onto wooden plates.

"Let's taste it for now."

"Uhh… O- Okay."

"It takes quite some courage to eat the first one."

The three girls reached out for the rather unappetizing "pseudo pastry" out of a sense of duty.

"….."

"….."

"….."

Their bitter expressions revealed that the wordless food sampling was by no means a bliss.

"Dolores, the one you made has not the slightest sweetness of the bananas. It's really tough to swallow."

"Well, excuse me! On the other hand, the one you made, Rethe, is too sweet! I bet you added even more sugar."

"Fay-chan's is too hard in the first place. Forget about chewing, I can barely break it with my hands!"

The three waiting maids merciless criticized the sweet of their co-workers.

Principally, one didn't evaluate his own cooking, because a self-evaluation was never objective, regardless of the outcome.

"Okay, now that we've reflected over it, let's try again!"

When she finished the brief tasting of the "pseudo pastry", Rethe declared that with an energetic voice without giving her stomach time to rest.

"Sure, we've got still lots of ingredients after all!"

"I would like to make something a bit more appetizing next…"

Persuaded by Rethe like that, Dolores and Fay raised from their chairs as well.

Experimenting, baking, tasting. That procedure repeated over and over again until the sun set.

And thus it was that today's day drew to a close for the "three troublemakers".

* * *

Afternoon on the next day.

In the kitchen of the inner palace, cooking department head Vanessa smiled akimbo at the trio, Fay, Dolores and Fay, which showed a nervous expression in front of her.

As lunch had just been served to Zenjirou, the kitchen now had some leeway.

"Okay, then show me the fruit of yesterday's labour."

"Yes!"

The three girls cheerfully responded in unison to Vanessa and started to act as to quickly show off the results from yesterday.

While Fay regulated the fire of the stove, Rethe kneaded the puff pastry. At the same time, Dolores positioned the portable game console in such a way that the clock was visible and then prepared a special sweet icing for the pastry by mixing high quality brown sugar with cinnamon.

There was no filling.

Yesterday, they hadn't been able to succeed in making a pastry with a filling like the typical apple pie or pumpkin pie.

Maybe the dough had been too thin, but the water from the filling had caused the bottom to slip off. And when they worried too much about the bottom slipping off, it became too tough to chew instead. Furthermore, it had been a tricky job to adjust the heat and baking time every time they changed the filling.

In the end, they had finally decided upon the kind they were making right now: A simple puff pastry pie without any filling in a rectangle shape and as long as two forefinger in a row.

They only mixed the dough roughly until it became crumbly, sliced it out in a rectangle shape, smeared oil over the entire thing, sprinkled abundant brown sugar and cinnamon over it and baked it in the stove.

Unlike yesterday, Zenjirou was taking all three meals in the inner palace today, so they hadn't much spare time. Only enough for one try.

"Okay, the dough is ready, Fay-chan."

"Looking good on my end, too. We can bake it any time!"

"Good, Rethe, put it into the stove. I'll keep track of the time."

Vanessa watched the young waiting maids, preparing the sweet with all their might, with a gentle and soft smile like watching over a small child.

"Okay, start baking!"

"Roger, forty minutes from now on! Fay!"

"Don't worry, I'll keep the temperature constant."

A sweet and aromatic fragrance from the stove wasn't long in the coming.

"….."

"….."

"….."

The three young maids nervously looked at cooking department head Vanessa while she reached out for the "pie" on the plate in front here without changing her carefree expression.

"Hmm, it seems quite different from how it was written on the recipe."

"Th- That's…"

Vanessa stopped Dolores, who reflexively tried to make excuses, with just a glance and continued.

"But well, it gets passing marks for appearance and smell for now. The flavour and texture remains to be seen."

Saying so, she opened her mouth widely and bit into square pie.

"Mm… Mmm…"

Only the munching sound of her jaws, chewing the freshly baked pastry, resounded through the otherwise silent kitchen.

Before long, Vanessa finished one piece of the pie and spoke.

"Yeah, not bad. I didn't expect any less from you, Rethe. It's well done."

"Th- Thank you very much!"

Rethe and the other two made joyful looks upon the praise, but Vanessa stiffened her expression, ready to spoil that joy.

"But there's still room for improvement. When you score it before baking, it'll be more flaky and pleasant on the gums. And you might as well cut it slimly and try to braid them into plaits. I'm sure it would turn out interesting.

To begin with, you're baking it after smearing it with oil and sprinkling sugar over it, but wouldn't it taste even better when you fry it in oil at first and only add the sugar and cinnamon afterwards? At least we can't serve it to Her Highness Aura and Zenjirou-sama as it is."

"…Yes."

The girls hung their heads and dropped their shoulders dejected.

A failure, huh.

Sometimes hard work didn't pay off in the world of work.

"But, well, you did work hard. Now I'll just have to perfect the recipe with Karina's group later on."

"Ehh!? Th- Then the reward…!"

"Fay, stop it!"

Fay unconsciously raised an angry voice. Dolores, standing next to her, stopped her with her hand, but Fay's anger didn't vanish from her face.

It was intolerable when the following group snatched the "exclusive usage for the refrigerator" from them, only for accomplishing the last step, even though the three of them were responsibility for all the progress so far.

Vanessa gave the petite maid, who showed a sulky expression that could get her in trouble with her superior, a wry smile while she

"Relax. I know very well that it would be unfair to you girls if I were to give the reward to Karina's group."

said that and patted Fay's small head with the palm of her stout hand like a mother did with her child.

"You mean!"

Crying in one moment, smiling in the next. That was applicable to Fay now as she instantly flashed a smile, whereat Vanessa said.

"Still, it's a fact that you three didn't perfect it like agreed upon. So, hmm… Let's say it's a half-success. The other half is to be a accomplished by Karina and the other girls.

Therefore, when Karina's group gets the recipe done to a level, where it can be served to Zenjirou-sama, then I'll give the exclusive usage of the refrigerator for one month to all six of you. What do you say?"

"Yes!!"

"Yes!!"

"Yes~♪"

The smiling three girls responded in unison.

Vanessa, too, showed a bright smile that wasn't inferior to theirs, and clapped her hands.

"Good. Then that's settled. I'll head over to Zenjirou-sama now and ask if he has any requests for today's sweet. In the meantime, you clean up here and get everything ready for later."

"Understood."

"Very well."

"Okay."

Vanessa left the kitchen after she emphasised that with a smile.

Left-behind, the troublemaking trio cleaned the dirtied tools and worktop like they were told to while chatting happily.

"Hey, shall we teach the recipe to Karina and the others today after work, since the condition changed?"

Fay suggested that to her two roommates as she cleaned the floury worktop with a small broom.

Dolores was washing the bowl by dunking it into a water bucket and nodded to the suggestion of her petite roommate after musing for a moment.

“Yeah, that might be better. I’ll show them how to read the time from this machine. In the end, they’ll surely have to rely on their own senses for the baking time, but having a clock at first makes it easier.”

“Right. The longer Karina-chan and the others take to get it done, the longer we’ll have to wait to use the refrigerator, so I agree!”

Wiping the scattered flour on the ground with a large broom, Rethe also approved of it.

The young waiting maids of the other group were practically in the same boat as them, so cooperating to obtain the blessing of the refrigerator as soon as possible was in their mutual interest.

“Good. In that case, let’s get our work over and done with and find Karina and Co.!”

“Yep. I think they’re currently in charge of the bath?”

“Keyshia-chan should be in Karina-chan’s group and I know where her room is!”

Interacting with a different group, to which they usually had no contact, of their own initiative, sharing knowledge amongst each other and cooperating for a shared objective.

By doing so, the entire body of young waiting maids gets to know each other better and even improves their cooking skills. Vanessa was aiming at that, but the girls in question seemed to actualize it without discerning her aim at all